# 覇剣の皇姫 アルティーナ

はけんのこうき アルティーナ

ALTINA the Sword Princess

Yukiya Murasaki
むらさきゆきや
ill. himesuz

小綺譚

ファミ通文庫

フェリシア
エディ
男A
「お前ら、鉄竜隊（レトラントウィル）か」

ロランド
バスティアン
エリーゼ
「こいつら、指名手配犯だ！」
「こ、これ！」
「宣戦布告のことなら、知ってる返り？」

# Chapter 1 - The Previous Night

One was the royal Princess Altina who was despatched to a Border Regiment at the tender age of fourteen.

One was a bibliophilic who was terrible in using swords and bows.

This was a story that happened before their fated meeting ——

# The Bibliophilic Dunce

Regis Auric was a dropout in the military academy.

He will cut his own leg if he wields a sword, fall off if he mounts a horse, and couldn't lift lances or shields either.

He wasn't very passionate about life.

Whenever he was free, he would engross himself in reading.

The evaluation of the instructors was 'the first time we saw such a hopeless one'.

Despite how useless Regis was, he had never lost a tactics battle starting from his enrolment to graduation.

Even the instructors were not a match for him.

However, war in this era was an affair of lances and arrows.

As the weirdo who held the record for fewest points in numerous subjects in the academy, he had braced himself on the possibility that he would never graduate.

But he was recruited by an elderly noble.

Why was he so lucky? After graduating military academy, Regis participated in a recruitment event organized by the army of the new nobles.

Regis' employer Marquis Thénezay wasn't known for his martial might, but was a good man beloved by the people for his frugal policies.

Regis thought Thénezay only wanted him as a chess opponent, but unexpectedly, Marquis Thénezay believed in Regis' talent.

"Study well, and contribute your knowledge to the Imperial and Noble armies" —— Not only did Regis get to read the Marquis' book collection, he also had permission to enter the Military Library.

And he was given a meagre salary as an apprentice strategist ——

Two and a half years passed in a flash.

For Regis, it was a busy and fulfilling time

But good times never last ——

## The Wine that Vanished

Altina woke up in her bed shivering.

“Brrr… It’s cold”

She could really feel during times like this that she was not in the capital any more.

Fireplaces were everywhere in Le Brane during winter, and it was as warm as spring.

*I have to get used to the cold as soon as possible* — She got up from the bed with such thoughts in her mind.

Her skin was pricked by the freezing air the moment she got out of her blanket.

Her room had mottled walls and wooden ceilings that had never been dusted before. To segregate the room from the outside world, only a small window to illuminate the room was installed.

It was like a prison.

— No, if she was locked inside the strong door, it would be a real prison.

Altina got up with a feeling of unease, rushed to the door and pulled the handle.

The door opened slowly with a creak…

“Ah, that’s great.”

“It’s not great at all, you haven’t dressed yourself yet, Your Highness.”

A young woman in maid attire stood at the door. This beautiful girl with brown hair and eyes was Clarisse.

She was one of the maids who served Altina in the capital. When Altina was exiled to the frontlines at the borders, she was the only one who volunteered to follow.

Despite that, one couldn't tell if Clarisse was infatuated or loyal to Altina from her usual behaviour. She was an unfathomable woman.

"Morning Clarisse."

"It's not that early anymore."

"But it's not that late now right?"

"You got up earlier than most people, so the timing is just right? All the soldiers are up."

"Ughh… I know."

She returned to the room with Clarisse.

And closed the door.

Clarisse took off Altina's night gown.

Revealing the Princess' bare body.

She didn't have the habit of wearing underwear while she slept.

After all, even royals couldn't obtain rare materials like soft cotton cloth and silk in this era.

Clarisse wiped Altina's body with water and then put a corset on her.

Corsets weren't only designed to cover the chest and waist, but also to sculpt the body.

"But, this is too tight… ughh…"

"It can't be helped, you can't look like a boy."

Clarisse pulled the corset tight behind Altina's back.

It hurt her stomach.

“Yeah… I will be laughed at if I look like a boy, sigh…”

“I won’t laugh.”

“Really?”

“I will just think you are sick.”

“…How mean.”

The dress she wore on the outside constricted Altina’s waist further.

After putting on her clothes, Altina sat before the mirror.

A girl with vermillion hair and crimson eyes was reflected in it.

This was the fourth Princess of the Empire, Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria.

As the result of a power struggle in the courts——

Despite being a girl fourteen years of age, Altina was appointed the commander of the Beilschmidt Border Regiment.

She just took up her post at Fort Sierck a few days ago.

The frontline far away from the capital.

And she was an amateur with no combat experience.

— *The soldiers around me must be more troubled than me by this*, Altina thought.

“It’s good that you get along well with the troops… But it would be great if everyone acknowledges you.”

“It’s not time yet, we can’t rush.”

Clarisse lowered her body and brushed Altina’s bright red hair carefully.

“Could it be that they don’t trust me as a commander? It feels like they are treating me like a guest.”

“It’s because you are very beautiful, Your Highness.”

“It’s not a compliment if you say it here.”

“People are jealous of you in the courts, and treat you like a vase in this fort… it must be hard on you.”

“Hmm... I wonder what should I do??”

“It would be fine for Your Highness. Everyone will love you. Because you are super cute, Princess… So cute, Your Highness, so very cute.”

Clarisse caressed Altina's cheeks and neck lightly as she brushed her hair.

It was itchy.

"Hmmm… Wait, stop. I don't need things like love. I want to be a real commander, so what I need is trust and loyalty!"

"You had a hard time living in the capital, but the general in this fort is a hardened veteran, and the soldiers are elite, Your Highness."

"Yeah."

"It is safe if I pass my time quietly."

"I know that very well but…"

*That isn't much different from a jail* — Altina bit her lips.

* * *

To earn the trust of the troops, she needed to let the regiment see her. And so, Altina started patrolling inside the fort every day.

She wore the minimum amount of armour on her dress, and hung a longsword at her waist.

The sword she was bestowed with after much drama when she left the capital — Grand Tonnerre Quatre—

Was inconvenient to use.

That sword was custom made according to the height of the founding Emperor, and was 26Pa (192cm) long.

In the narrow corridor of the fort, she would often scratch the wall and knock things and people over with her sword.

For practical purpose, she wore a normal longsword at her waist.

Clarisse followed cheerfully.

"Going for a stroll, Your Highness?"

“It’s a patrol. Pa! Troll!”

“Alright. Time for a stroll lala~~”

“Ehh…. I think I should start by earning respect from Clarisse.”

“What do you mean!? I have always held the greatest respect and loyalty to the Princess!? I will offer my life if you order me to do so, and can strip right here if you will it!”

“I won’t ask for that!”

“Fufu… I really adore you, Your Highness.”

Clarisse had been her personal maid for over six years, although she has been saying strange things since Altina knew her.

Normal maids would refrain from talking and keep their distance to avoid offending their mistress.

However, Clarisse was quieter than other maids in the presence of people other than Altina.

Loud shouting could be heard the moment they exited the central tower.

The soldiers were training in the courtyard.

“Hah!!”

“Hei!!”

“Slash faster! You are all so slow that dragonflies can stop at the tip of your weapon!”

“Ah hah!!”

The soldiers did their training as well as they maintained their equipment spontaneously, which showed the discipline of the army.

Altina’s impression of the garrison unit in the courts felt graceful, but this was how all units in the frontlines were like.

She turned and walked on.

Her patrol route followed such a schedule:

The living space of the officers in the east.

The northern gate and parade square.

The zone of the rank and file to the west, which was the messiest place.

And finally, the warehouse and stables in the south.

When they passed by the plaza in the south, Clarisse pointed to the warehouse.

“Your Highness, there is a dispute over there.”

“It seems so! Let’s take a look!”

In front of the warehouse.

About a dozen men were glaring at each other.

If not for the armour they were wearing, Altina would have mistaken them for hooligans.

A young knight was being shouted at.

“Ahh!? Sir Knight, you must have gotten something wrong!?”

“What, you are the ones who stole it right!?”

“Hahh!? No one will do that! Where’s your proof, you greenhorn knight!”

“Why you! I am a proud member of the Black Knights! I won’t stand for your insult!”

He was going to draw his sword.

Altina charged over there and took a deep breath.

“Stop!”

She roared.

The place turned silent instantly.

Altina coughed dryly.

And felt a little nervous.

“Soldier of the honourable Imperial Army shouting at each other like mad dogs is disgraceful. If you have something to say, just let me know.”

She felt a little happy to act the part of a commander.

The delinquent looking soldiers frowned.

The knight in black armour lowered his head carefully.

“This… I am sorry for the disturbance… This is an internal matter… There is no need to trouble Your Highness, just a small issue.”

“Not ‘Your Highness’, it should be commander.”

“That is true… I misspoke.”

“Since it is an internal matter, I will need to know. After all, I am responsible for the Regiment now.”

“Y-Yes…”

“So, what happened?”

Altina urged, and the knight explained anxiously.

He held an account book in his hand.

“I am Aubert of the Black Knights, and I’m tasked with the management of this warehouse.”

He then showed the account book made by bundling papers in his hand, which listed the time something was received and the balance stocks.

By the way, papers were produced by paper mills using wood, which was popularized fifty years ago. It has widespread usage among the populace now, but it was a high grade item comparable to silk in the past.

Altina tilted her head.

“A knight managing the warehouse?”

“Erm… Yes. The warehouse manager isn’t here, so…”

Aubert looked troubled, and it was clear he didn’t take on the task on his own accord.

He was a young knight, so his seniors probably forced him.

The problem was with the account book.

“The high quality wine listed here is gone.”

“All gone?”

“An entire crate of grape wine for the exclusive use of the officers is missing.”

“The entire crate!?”

“It’s too heavy for one person to move, and it is too much for anyone to drink. This is obviously embezzlement!”

Altina opened her eyes wide.

Theft. Embezzlement.

Both were serious crimes in the army!

A tall man on the other side shouted:

“Hey, don’t keep shooting your mouth off!!”

The delinquent who was acting like a squad leader stood in front of the five armoured men.

“Princess, don’t believe what that knight fellow said!”

“I will listen to what you have to say. Also, I am the commander…”

“I am the sentry of the warehouse, just call me Deffand. This warehouse is guarded in shifts at all times by five men, it’s impossible for thieves to break in! Hey, it must be you who miscounted, jerk ass knight!”

The guard commander Deffand snorted.

Aubert showed an angry expression with his accounts book in hand.

“That’s impossible! Isn’t the guard commander the most suspicious!? You all are the only ones who hold the keys!”

“Damn it! We are the one who will be punished if things go missing in the warehouse!! It’s impossible for us to steal!”

The guards behind Deffand concurred: “That’s right! That’s right!”

I see.

If she believes what Aubert holding the accounts book says, then it is the responsibility of Deffand and his guards.

If Deffand and the others were innocent, then it was the fault of Aubert, the temporary manager of the accounts book.

They were still arguing—

At this moment, a man who was sitting at the side barged in.

He came from a group of three without armour, just here to help carry the cargo. The man Indri was their representative.

“Erm… Can we go back now?”

There was one more person.

A middle aged trader called Trepreneur who frequents Fort Sierck for business.

He brought woven products from the capital today, such as curtains, tablecloths and clothing.

“Erm, it would be troubling for us too. I still have another trade to make, and it is almost time for me to go.”

“... I will listen to what you all have to say alright…”

* * *

These were the things that happened this morning:

The trader Trepreneur brought the woven products over.

He was hired to transport the goods, and came with Indri's group to carry the cargo.

The Knight Aubert had his hands on the accounts book at all time.

The guard commander Deffand and four of his men kept guard over the warehouse.

Deffand held the key to the warehouse.

When Trepreneur carried his goods into the warehouse, it was discovered that a crate of high grade wine that was stored inside half a month ago was missing.

Embezzlement!

And so, the group started squabbling.

While they were doing that, Altina and Clarisse arrived.

"... So that's it?"

"Yes, I swear it's the truth Your Highness"

The accounts knight Aubert said.

"My men and I didn't enter the warehouse, Princess." Guard commander Deffand said.

"Princess, we are not involved, right?" Indri who was helping out chipped in.

"Erm, I have to go for my next business deal..." The trader Trepreneur said.

Altina frowned.

*I can't get rid of this princess thing* — She decided to pursue the matter next time.

Wrong! The missing wine is the real issue here!

Silence.

Thinking.

“I see… I don’t get it at all.”

She gave up.

Clarisse sighed softly.

But she didn’t say anything, Clarisse could only keep quiet like a normal maid right now, as there were other people around.

She approached Altina quietly.

Even though Clarisse didn’t say anything, Altina knew what she wanted to say.

Altina could wield a sword taller than she was, but she was not good at thinking.

But wrist power was useless right now.

“T-This doesn’t mean I am stupid! Nobody here knows the answer, so this question must be too difficult.”

She decided.

Delegating tasks to subordinates reasonably was the duty of the commander, so she had to rely on someone smarter than her to work out the problem! Probably!

Altina poked the maid besides her.

“Clarisse, do you know the answer?”

“No.”

“Anything at all? Did you notice something?”

“There is a simple way to solve the problem.”

The men shouted “Really, I’m counting on you!” “Oh, let’s solve this quickly!” “We have other work to do, that’s a big help!” “Ah… Can I go to my next deal now?”

Clarisse was expressionless.

She raised her finger to her throat and moved it side to side.

And in a calm tone,

“...Just execute all of them, Your Highness.”

These fools had all forgotten.

In this era where the authority lies with the lords, aside from criminal proceedings in accordance to the law, the aristocrats could issue capital punishment in their territory.

But most lords avoid acting in such a devilish manner so that their vassals and family wouldn’t accuse them of being inhumane.

The girl with vermillion hair might be fourteen, but she was a royal and the commander of the Border Regiment. Who dare say she won’t execute anyone? No one could guarantee that.

The group’s face turned green.

Altina slouched her shoulders and sighed.

She then waved her hands.

“I won’t do that. Wouldn’t the innocent be punished too if I do that?”

“Yes... pardon me.”

The brown haired girl bowed deeply.

She showed a happy smile momentarily on her face hidden behind her fringe. “No matter what, I can’t execute innocent people” — Altina chided.

“Phew——” The men sighed in relief.

Altina crossed her arms.

Sound of friction came from her chest armour.

She couldn’t think of a good plan.

“Ugh… Anyway, let’s check the warehouse. Since the crate was stolen, there might be a hole or something.”

## Idle Conversation in the Book Shop

After Regis graduated from Military Academy, he joined the Marquis’ army as a staff.

After working for two and a half years, he moved up a grade which made him a Fifth Grade Admin Officer.

But good times didn’t last.

Thénezay died in battle.

“... Even though he was a good man.”

That was the first time Regis cried since his parents’ funeral.

Before the War Administration Ministry decides on his assignment, he has a short vacation. But if he leaves the capital, there was a chance he would be charged with desertion.

Which meant that he was waiting for his punishment.

He would probably be demoted.

There was something that was certain, his next posting would be to the front lines at the borders.

The Belgaria Empire right now was at war with its neighbouring countries, and was embroiled with raids by barbarians and internal strife.

There were countless battlefields.

“Well… I won’t have a say on where I would be posted… Gillianus' work 'Merleau's adventure’ also stated —— No matter what troubles tomorrow brings, there is no need to stop and sigh this day.”

Regis visited the book shop as usual.

The one he frequented was along the main street, a grand two

storey building.

The book shelves formed narrow aisles.

Decades ago, books were written by hand, and were valuable items only the upper crust of society could access.

But because of the spread of paper and the printing press, the commoners could get books easily too. It was rare to see someone like Regis who was always reading — he called himself an avid reader, but he was actually Le rat de bibliothèque.

“Ara, welcome Mr Regis.”

“Ah, hello.”

The one who greeted him was the lady shop owner.

She had shoulder length black bob haircut, pale skin and wore a blue apron.

Her name was Carol, and inherited the book shop from her parents.

“Mr Regis, what kind of books are you looking for?”

“… Any strange books?”

“Strange books?”

“I just feel like reading something novel now.”

“Ahh, is that so? How about this one?”

“What is it about?”

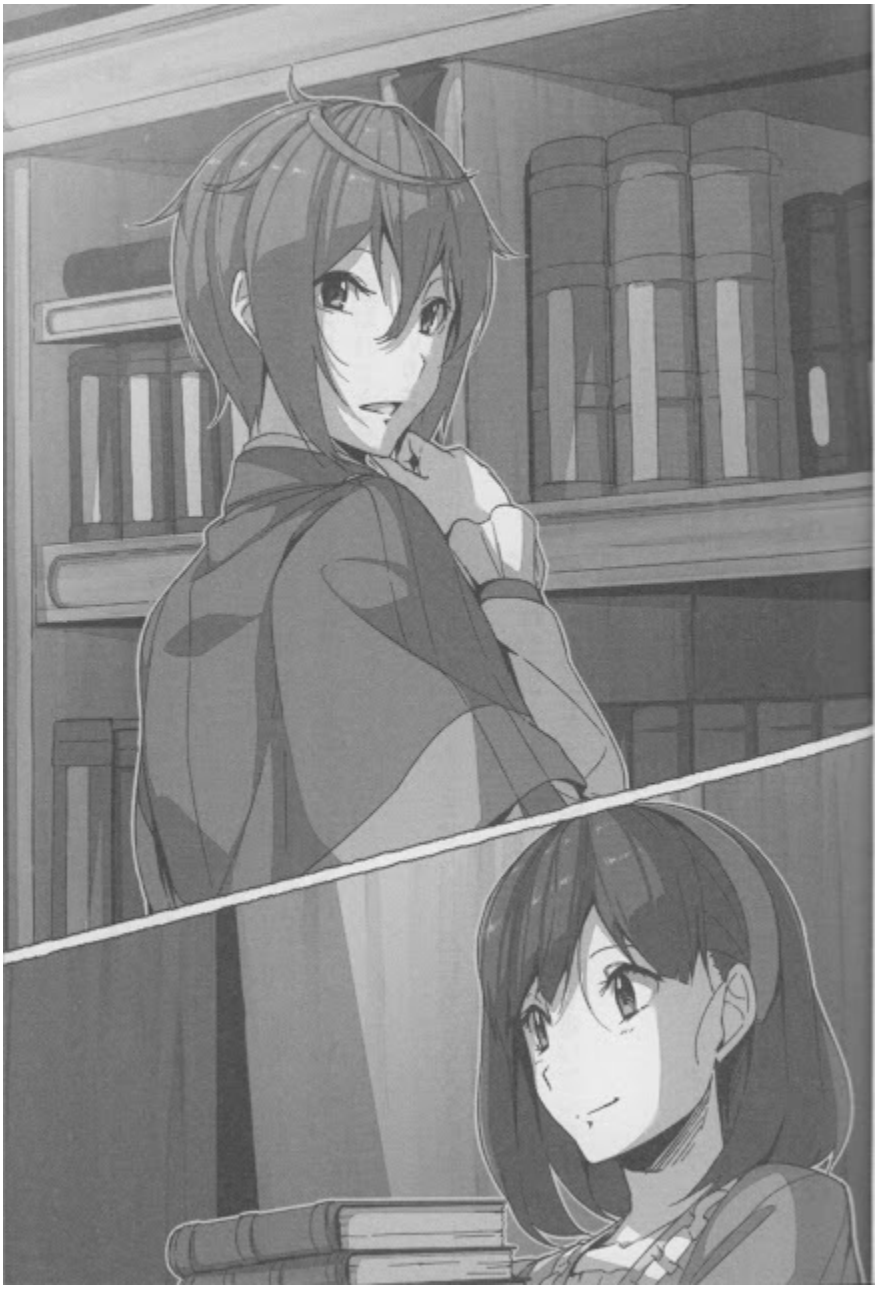
“The main character is a dog.”

“Fufu, I see… a mystery story huh…”

While they were conversing, a traveling merchant with a cape on his shoulders entered.

Regis judged him to be a traveling merchant because he always had his bag on him, and wore comfortable and tough boots. Those who wore boots on the streets were usually travellers with a small bag on

them.



The merchant nodded to Regis who was in uniform.

He then greeted the shop owner.

“It’s been so long, Ms Carol.”

“Ah, isn’t this Trepreneur!? I heard you went to the northern front.”

“That’s right, I just got back.”

“I heard there will be a huge battle in the north soon, what are you

thinking, going there during a time like this.”

“That’s why I went! This is the time to rake in the money!!”

“You are the same as usual. Mr Trepreneur, I’m glad you are safe.”

“Sigh— It’s not that safe— I was almost beheaded—”

“Ehhh!?”

“Don’t worry, my head is still attached to my body, and I received my money, hahaha—”

“Fufu… Please tell me about it.”

In front of the shelves — at a corner of the book shop, there was a space where they could have coffee.

Regis was invited too.

“How about coming along if you have time?”

“... Pardon my intrusion.”

Everyone sat down.

The traveling merchant was the friend of Carol’s father, and would drop by once in a while.

* * *

Three coffee cups were served.

In large book shops in the Empire, it was common to find a cafe working together with a book shop.

During the time when books were a high class item, there were two ways to sell them. One was to display them on the walls just like how art merchants did, the other was to place a bookshelf at the corner of a cafe.

Back then, there were many businessmen who visited and communicated here. Carol’s shop belonged to the latter, and

maintained the space to drink coffee.

Because you can't take the book away before paying.

As they sipped on the coffee—

Carol asked the merchant:

"Did something happen when you delivered the goods that put you in risk of being beheaded?"

"No— it was before I handed the goods over—..."

Regis drank his coffee quietly as he listened to their conversation.

In the warehouse of a fort somewhere, a crate of high class wine went missing.

That was what triggered the entire incident.

There were even dangerous discussions about beheading everyone involved.

"Well, it was just a joke. I understand because I am a merchant and wasn't worried at all!"

"Fufufu… I see. But the fact that an entire crate of wine vanished is strange. The accounting done by the knight probably didn't match… right?"

"I think so too. Speaking of which, there have been instances of things going missing in the past too. That knight is really not suited for accounting, hahah!"

Trepreneur's body kept shaking as he laughed, and knocked the coffee over.

Carol gave him another cup of water.

"What do you think, Mr Regis?"

"... Even if you ask me… I am not a detective."

"You are too humble, aren't you a strategist?"

“Eh— you are a tactician—?”

Carol puffed out her chest proudly.

“That’s right, Mr Regis is an outstanding strategist, the rising star of the Marquis army.”

“Ehh! Isn’t that amazing!?”

“No… I’m just an admin officer, and I am out of a job now…”

“Even so, didn’t you command the unit splendidly a few days ago? I heard plenty of people say so.”

“No, erm, I’m just giving advice… I didn’t really direct…”

“You are the same as usual, Mr Regis. Leave the battle aside, let me hear your opinion on the vanished wine.”

Carol gazed at him with anticipation.

Trepreneur looked at him with appraising eyes.

Regis’ personality had nothing to do with confidence.

After all these years he had been criticized to be incompetent and holding the others back in the Academy, so he was used to being treated like a fool, and wasn’t comfortable with being praised.

So he wasn’t good at giving his opinion when asked.

That might be so, but I don’t want to disappoint Carol who has been taking care of me — That’s how he felt.

“... Is there any books that could be used in such a case?”

Regis fell silent.

And closed his eyes.

Browsing through the book shelves in his mind, he picked a book and flipped it open. He read a similar story before.

I see, I remember.

“... Hmm… I don’t think there is any problem with the accounts book. High class wine doesn’t come to the front lines that often. That was why the knight doing the accounting noticed.”

“Ahh, I see! He will remember the valuable items, and won’t notice if he actually forgot!”

“Hmm? Let me think. So the suspicion lies with the guards?”

“... Really? The guard says that they would be punished if things inside the warehouse go missing.”

“T-That’s true? Impossible right?”

Trepreneur’s eyes wavered.

Carol looked like she was thinking.

“In that case, it is the merchant and the soldiers helping out?”

“Eh—— !? The merchant is me— That’s impossible—— !?”

“Fufufu, just kidding!”

“... If that is so, Mr Trepreneur’s behaviour is weird. He has nothing to gain from spreading this to others.”

He relaxed, so the only ones left were…

“So —— only the soldiers who helped me are left!?”

“Wait! It might people who are not related too.”

Carol raised her doubt.

Regis added on:

“It’s hard to imagine that the wine theft was committed by unrelated people… The management of military resources are marked with serial numbers. It is impossible to know the content just by seeing the crate of the wine. Stealing the valuable items without opening the crate is evidence that the thieves already knew the contents. For example, the helpers carrying the goods.”

“I see, that’s it!”

“Hmm? Let’s assume the helpers are the criminals, we still don’t know how the theft was committed?”

The biggest riddle was how the theft was committed.

Trepreneur explained the structure of the warehouse again.

“Hmm? The walls are 27Pa (200cm), the ceiling are made of thick masonry, the roof is made of wood. With guards around them, it would be hard to approach it.”

“Will it collapse if a cannon hits it?”

“What about the floor?”

“Impossible. We considered the floor, but it’s covered with large cobblestones to withstand the heavy weight of the goods.”

The two of them looked at Regis.

They were treating him like a detective who was explaining the crime —

Regis felt uneasy.

“… What? I am not a detective… A real detective would be quicker in his explanation.”

“Huh? What about interrogating the soldiers to determine who the criminal is?”

“If you do that, they will push the blame to each other—”

“… There is another way… ‘Those who gain without labouring will never forget the easiness, and will repeat it until their fall’, from ‘The lawful dog and the outlaw wolf’.”

As he chatted casually while sipping his coffee, Regis never thought this would change his destiny.

## In the Crate

Half a month later, Fort Sierck.

Clarisse jogged with the receipt that was prepared earlier in hand.

She handed the document signed by the Princess to the merchant Trepreneur.

“… Sorry for the wait.”

“Not at all, thank you— Is Her Highness busy—?”

“Yes— Her Highness doesn’t have time to leave her room.”

“Is that so? It’s a shame that I couldn’t see her beautiful figure—”

Trepreneur said as he sent the goods he brought from the capital to the warehouse.

The wooden crate about the size of a coffin was really heavy.

The one helping was still Indri’s group.

They came to help as they asked Trepreneur to give them tips.

A vague reason…

The accounting knight Aubert recorded the items carried into the warehouse.

The guard commander Deffand and his men had a tense aura around them.

It was different than usual.

Aubert asked Trepreneur:

“Ah… T-This looks really expensive…?”

He said his line stiffly. It was obviously an act, but on an amateur level.

Trepreneur frowned and Clarisse sighed quietly.

Aubert’s face turned green.

“Ermm ——”

“Ah ha!! That’s right—!! This is a sculpture gifted by a certain grand noble— An unimaginably valuable item—!!”

Trepreneur said exaggeratingly.

According to the original plan, Aubert should be the one asking — but judging that to be impossible, Clarisse asked in his stead:

“... An expensive piece of art huh. How much can it be sold for if you sell it in the city?”

“Ara, the price would be above 1000 Livres!!”

“… That’s a lot.”

Clarisse didn’t have much reaction, but the soldiers opened their eyes wide.

The annual income of a soldier was typically 20 Livres.

So it would take them 50 years to earn that amount.

“Hahaha! It’s a huge sum, so be careful everyone!”

Trepreneur raised his voice, Indri and his group carrying the crate nodded.

They carried it to the wall of the warehouse carefully.

Indri and his group looked at each other and smiled.

* * *

Late at night——

The thick walls in the warehouse isolated the room from the outside, as temperature dropped drastically.

However, the stone walls not only kept light and sound out, it also kept heat in.

There wasn’t any light or sound in this place.

The crate with the expensive sculpture lay quietly amidst food stocks and other resources.

Click crack—

A sudden noise.

It was the sound of hard objects colliding with each other.

Followed by stones sliding against each other.

A ray of light illuminated the darkness.

A large slab of stone was lifted off the ground.

The slab was held in place by a piece of log.

One man slipped out from the gap. The lantern in his hand lit up the dark warehouse.

“Hey… Lift it higher, the crate won’t fit.”

The man who was suppressing his voice was Indri.

“How about breaking the crate open?”

His friend’s voice came from below.

Indri shook his head.

“No, the sound of nails being removed could be heard outside through the stone walls and metal gate. Alright, let’s get to it, adjust the height of the jack. Lift the slab higher.”

A creaking sound could be heard, like the grinding sound of a mortar.

The log turned as it lifted the slab higher.

After reaching the adequate height, three men emerged from below the slab.

“Ok, let’s carry it out.”

“Fuhahaha, a treasure worth 1000 Livres!”

“Let’s sell this off and live a life of luxury! We don’t need to return to

the army anymore!”

The men laughed quietly.

And put their hands on the crate.

Which shook.

The loud voice of a girl came out from it.

“That’s as far as you go!!”

The cover of the crate then flew off. A violent sound echoed in the warehouse. The men retreated.

“What is that… Ughh.”

Indri groaned as he shivered, the other two showed the white of their eyes.

A pair of legs came out from the crate that supposedly had a sculpture inside.

And the figure of a person rose slowly after the legs.

This was the person who kicked off the cover from the inside.

Under the shine of the lantern, the figure of a person became clear.

A girl.

She had a slender waist and her chest was covered by a plate, she also armour on her thin wrists.

And then there was her beautiful face.

If this was a sculpture, it would be worth more than 1000 Livres. On her pretty face, ruby like eyes were gleaming.

The men forgot the situation they were in and lost themselves looking at her.

The girl had hair that was redder than the flames of a lantern.

“Fu, I see. A tunnel huh? And lifting the stone slab with jacks used

for building houses.”

“Ah… Ugh…”

Indri couldn’t say anything.

He was found out by the commander of the Border Regiment, the Princess.

There was no way he could talk his way out.

Did a person of her status not care about nailing herself into a crate that looked like a coffin!?

The girl looked at the men.

“You helped to carry the cargo in order to identify the highly valued items. And to avoid placing anything onto the slab, you covered the tunnel… Isn’t that right?”

“Tchhh…”

Indri gritted his teeth.

Relaxed his shoulders.

And sighed.

“... Hmm, I see Princess… So you already knew we are the culprits?”

“That merchant Trepreneur knew an excellent strategist. He identified the culprit just by listening for a while, and even taught him how to apprehend you all.”

“I see… So there was such a person here… But did he forget to warn you?”

“Warn me?”

“Warn you… You can’t defeat us alone, Princess!”

Indri drew his short sword.

The other men drew the blades on their waist too.

“A-Are we doing it Indri!?”

“She’s a Princess!?”

“That’s not important! Just kill her and run! That’s the only way!!”

The three men lifted their swords.

Altina sighed.

“It’s just as that strategist said… I thought preparing this was unnecessary, but…”

She squatted down into the coffin like crate.

Grabbed a decorative hilt.

And pulled it out.

If it was just Altina, the crate didn’t need to be so big. Furthermore, it wouldn't have been too heavy if it was just Altina in there.

While she was inside the crate, there was something else inside that made the men work so hard to carry it.

It was taller than the girl.

A heavy sharp blade that was gleaming silver.

It was a sword.

Several times larger than a normal one.

Altina lifted the colossal sword ‘Grand Tonnerre Quatre’.

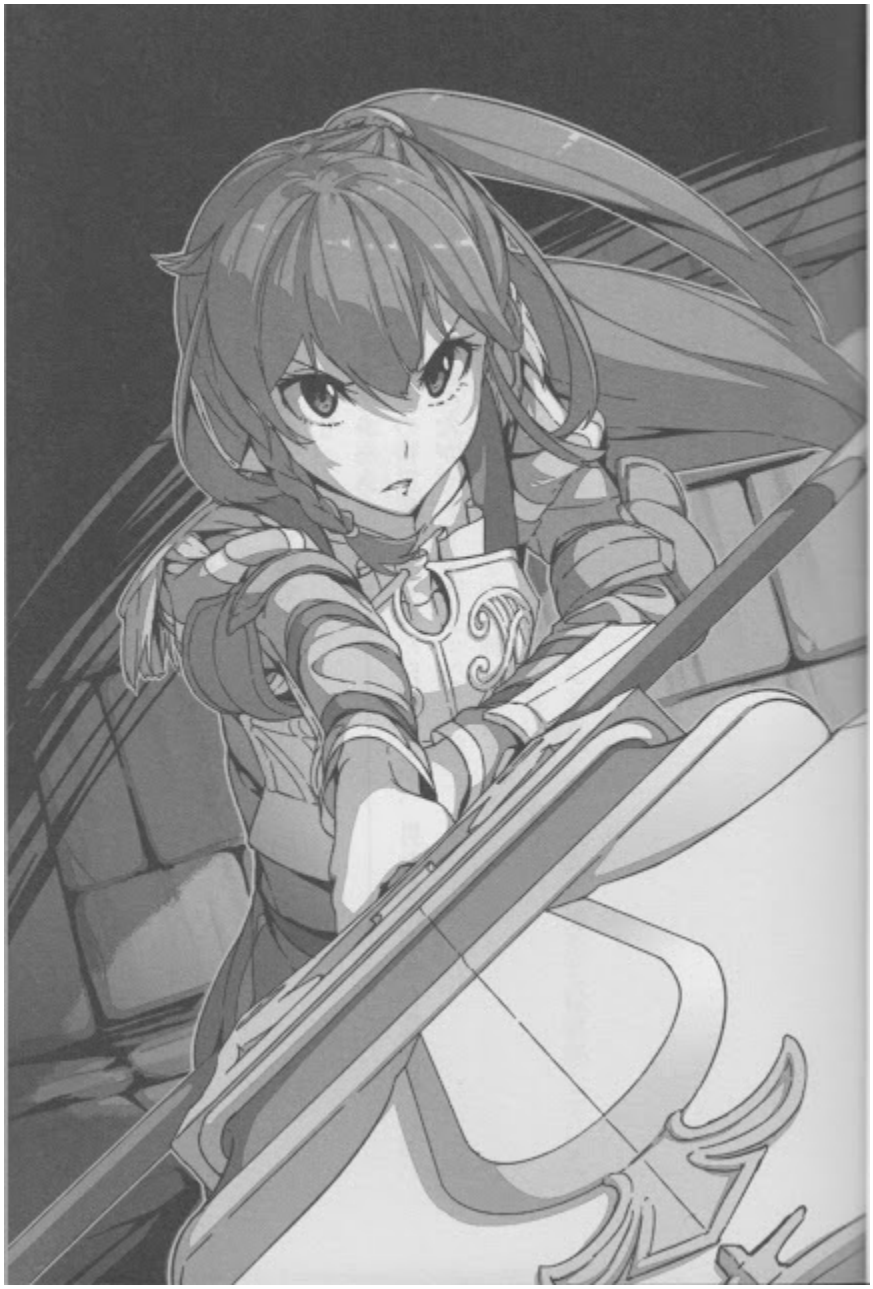
There was a relief engraved on the mirror like body of the blade, emphasizing that this was a sword of a conqueror.

“As Imperial soldiers, you should be defending the Empire, but you all are stealing military necessities for your selfish greed. Don’t think you can escape!”

“Ku… There’s no way she could wield such a huge sword!”

“W-We have to do it!”

”She’s just a woman! Don’t be scared! Kill her and run!”



The men charged with their swords raised.

They did not waver, as they were elite Belgarian soldiers.

However, the reach of the blade brought an overwhelming victory for the Princess.

Before they could swing their swords —

The silver blade was right before their faces.

Altina yelled:

“Uwwaaahhhh —— !!”

‘Grand Tonnerre Quatre’ that was forged from Tristei sent the men flying.

She used the flat side instead of the edge.

—— Day break.

When the warehouse door was opened because of the commotion, the three men had already fainted.

There were bruises and fractures, but nothing life threatening.

The guard commander Deffand tied them up.

Clarisse approached Altina.

“Your Highness!”

“Hah, it worked! The plan succeeded splendidly!”

“Are you hurt!?”

“Of course not. As you can see, not even a scratch.”

Altina smiled in reply.

Clarisse sighed deeply.

“Sigh… You don’t need to do this personally, Your Highness… There are plenty of knights in the fort.”

“If I settle it personally, they will acknowledge me as the commander right?”

“... I told you before you got into the crate, a commander shouldn’t be taking on such missions.”

Clarisse who was quieter than anyone was very worried.

She spoke much more than usual.

Altina swung her sword confidently.

“I need to lead from the front if there is anything dangerous or troublesome. I am not a Princess who only needs protection.”

“... But you are a Princess.”

“You are right, but even so, I want to be someone the soldiers will trust!”

Clarisse lowered her head.

“I believe that the Princess won’t lose to the thieves… But that doesn’t mean I won’t worry about you getting hurt…”

“It’s fine. I appreciate your thoughts.”

“... I am just glad that you are fine, Your Highness.”

Clarisse finally reverted to her emotionless expression again.

Altina would prefer her to smile, but it couldn’t be helped with so many people around.

Trepreneur rubbed his hands together in flattery.

“Hya — Amazing!! Beautiful and skilled in combat!! As expected of Your Highness!”

Altina had already gotten used to such flattery, and smiled gently in return.

“Thank you very much Princess! We were so close to being punished! It’s all thanks to you that we can prove our innocence!”

“No, who would have thought that there was such a contraption in the warehouse. It must be hard on you all.”

The guards thanked her profusely.

The accounting knight Aubert came over and bowed deeply.

“Thank you Your Highness… Also, Deffand… I am very sorry for doubting you.”

“Huh!? It’s fine, I should be apologizing for saying all that to you, Sir Knight.”

It seemed that their relationship had improved.

Altina sighed in relief.

She stabbed her sword into the ground.

The silent Clarisse asked with a look from her eyes: *What's the matter?*

Altina stretched her neck.

"How should I put this… It's amazing. The person who solved the incident after listening to the details."

"..... Yes, it is shocking."

"Hey Clarisse, will I get closer to my goal if I have such a strategist by my side?"

"... You want to meet him?"

"Yes. Meet him in person and… talk. What is he like? Speaking of which, I didn't hear how old he is, is he an old geezer?"

"... But for the Princess, you want a sage who can state what he really thinks."

"Ah, that's right."

As the Fourth Princess of Belgaria and the commander of Beilschmidt Border Regiment, there were few which Altina truly wanted to meet.

If that person is a sage, it would be great.

Superficial words in a social setting wouldn't be good enough.

"Hmm, we need to ask how the person who thought up the plan felt. Hey, Clarisse has to think about it too."

"Yes, but the Princess thinks she can trick the strategist…"

"Huh?"

"..... Nothing."

Altina knocked her own head lightly.

“Ah, a good idea! I have thought of a way to ask how he really thinks!”

“... How would you do that?”

“Fufu, well——”

Altina whispered to her excitedly and Clarisse frowned.

* * *

—— A few days later.

In the capital.

Carol’s book shop.

“Morning Mr Regis… Erm, are you okay?”

“... My mind? Or my future? You advised me on them both.”

“Your body! Your face looks terrible, and there are dark circles under your eyes.”

“Ahh… The book I bought last time was so interesting that I didn’t eat or sleep much. Have the new releases from that author arrived yet?”

I am happy for the income, but you want me to be a murderer?”

“Fufufu… Killing someone because of the book you sell…. Cough!? Hack cough cough!”

“Mr Regis!?”

As Regis was coughing non-stop, a man walked in.

“That is really tiring —!”

It was the traveling merchant.

“Ara, isn’t that Trepreneur?”

His face was green. A few days ago, Regis received a gift from the fort to the north through him, which was really heartening.

“Cough… What’s the matter?”

Regis asked as Carol patted his back.

It seemed to be a big matter.

Trepreneur sounded anxious.

“They are coming, the nation in the north is attacking — !!”

“Oh no, is it war?”

“Yes! That’s it —! That’s why I couldn’t sell the oil in the northern fort!!”

It was a business matter.

Carol said uneasily: “Isn’t it dangerous to stay there?”

The borders were the frontlines, and was always accompanied by battles.

There were many who didn’t return.

Regis thought about the war in the north.

“... One day, I will have go to a place like that.”

And then ——

Regis and Altina would meet in two months time.

*Letter of Appointment*

*Mr Regis Auric 5th grade admin officer*

*I hereby order your transfer to Beilschmidt border regiment.*

*Empire year 850 December 13th*

*Belgaria Empire 1st Army Commander*
*Field Marshal Allen Deux Latreille*

# Chapter 2 - Auguste, the silver Princess

## Part 1

After the youth Regis who was a soldier as well as someone who's bad at swordsmanship and horsemanship was sent to the borders of

the Empire, a lot of things happened and he became a strategist.

The commander of the Border Regiment was the Fourth Princess Altina, whose goal was becoming Empress, and changed the Empire that was at a perpetual never ending war. In order to be good enough to assist her, Regis was working hard on reading his books today too.

“Ughh… My eyes are turning dry…”

He read the entire night and burned several candles, but had yet to finish half of the mountain of books.

It was almost dawn.

I really want coffee.

Only officers could eat at the officer’s mess. Although Regis was a non-commissioned officer, he received special permission to eat there because he was Altina’s strategist. This wasn’t an extraordinary privilege, but the men would hate seeing a staff eating in the normal mess.

That might be so, but most of the officers were nobles, so Regis who was a commoner felt uneasy there.

In the end, he tried his best to avoid eating there at the same time as the others.

Breakfast time was already over and the kitchen started preparing for lunch. There were no signs of any officers there.

Altina was drinking tea alone.

“Ara, good morning Regis.”

“Ahh… Good morning Altina.”

He would use honorifics in front of others, when the two of them were alone, he would address her in a close way since she wished for it.

“Your face looks terrible.”

“Well, I did try to groom myself…”

“I don’t mean that, you stayed up all night again?”

“There’s a lot of work to do.”

“You have to rest properly.”

“I know, I will rest before I pass out…”

“Don’t use passing out as a standard.”

“It’s fine, I didn’t mix up the names of the book, and could tell them apart.”

“That’s not the problem.”

Altina sighed.

Regis tilted his head.

“Well, it should be fine… Are you still reading that?”

“… Yeah.”

Altina was holding the letter from the Second Prince Latreille.

They had different mothers, but he was still her brother, the man who appointed her as the commander of the Border Regiment.

There wasn’t any good news on the letter, or rather, the content was depressing.

“… He was a gentle person in the past.”

“Prince Latreille?”

“When we were young… We used to drink tea and spar with swords occasionally.”

“Is that so? Well, the royal family is still a family.”

“I played with the Third Prince Bastian too. That guy likes to play pranks and annoy others.”

“Ehh… That’s the first time I heard that. What did he do?”

“He turned all the statues in the courtyard upside down and carried a cow to the rooftop. But that’s just things he did as a kid.”

“Ehh…? No, that’s… normally impossible right? Was it done by a group of people?”

“It was just him! Surprised!? Bastian is really strong, he was stronger than Latreille who was 8 years older.”

“Erm… I don’t think it’s a question of age. Humans can’t do things like lifting statues or cows.”

“Ehhh? Is that so?”

Did the children of the Belgaria royal family eat and train in a different manner?

Regis couldn’t think of anything.

But now that he thought about it, just seeing Altina wielding a sword taller than herself was an amazing sight.

“Everyone was strong, so it didn’t feel strange… Ah, Auguste is an exception.”

“The First Prince huh. I heard he is frail.”

“Well, I never spoke to him much, he spent most of the time in his bed.”

“If he is healthy, he would probably be the Emperor now.”

That would avoid unnecessary power struggles, and the Empire would be governed and developed much more smoothly.

As long as Auguste isn’t a fool, but…

Altina asked:

“Regis, you knew about Auguste?”

“As a commoner, do you think I would know better than Altina who lived in the palace?”

“Not really. Just like how I didn’t know why I was given that

nickname.”

“Ahh… The ‘Arrow-Sparrow Princess’.”

Altina frowned at this point.

After seeing the duel between Altina and Jerome, the soldiers of Fort Sierck no longer called her that, but the name was still circulating in the capital.

“Enough about me, let’s talk about Auguste.”

“Alright… Actually, I don’t really know about the courts either...”

Carlos Liam Auguste de Belgaria, the first in the line of succession was frail from birth, and couldn’t handle daily works. On top of that, his mother was the Second Imperial Consort.

He might be the successor of the Emperor in name, but there were many doubts about him in the populace.

His strongest competitor was Latreille, the son of the Empress. He also had the support of many nobles, and held the highest office in the military.

“... There are rumours about him being assassinated.”

“Yes. I saw him being carried away, there was a lot of blood.”

That happened last summer.

After dinner, Auguste suddenly vomited blood on his way back to his room, and became delirious.

He might be frail, but such a sudden deterioration in health was unexpected, so there were rumours about him being poisoned spreading in the streets.

“... The official word is that he fell ill because of his health… But the poison rumours persisted. Anyway… It is rare to see Prince Auguste after that incident.”

“Yeah. I would see him at festivals in the past, but he spends most of the time in bed now.”

“There is another rumour…”

“What is it?”

“... Is Auguste actually dead? Some people said that.”

Altina tilted her head.

“No matter how bad his health is, that’s impossible. I met him several times after his illness too.”

“Ahh, I see. All rumours are baseless anyway… Well, had Prince Auguste been dead, the Second Consort would have taken action.”

“Really?”

“A Consort that couldn’t give birth to a successor would be in an awkward position. She isn’t young anymore, so she might have to leave the palace… Which would make it even harder for her to meet the Emperor.”

“I see. My mother was also sent away from the palace.”

Altina was a girl, and her mother who was a commoner without any backing from nobles slowly lost her place in the palace.

She pondered deeply:

“Hmm… That might be so… but there is something that bothers me.”

“What is it?”

“I did meet Auguste, but I didn’t get to talk to him much. He still had red eyes and beautiful silver hair… But he was always sitting or lying in bed, and they stopped me from getting close to him. Maybe he had a contagious disease.”

“... Contagious disease huh.”

“I don’t really understand, I heard his sister had the same illness.”

“The fifth Princess Felicia… I heard she is recuperating in her hometown.”

These were the reasons why doubts about the Second Consort not

having children who could succeed the throne arose.

“Felicia was born half a year after me, she is a bit strange.”

“… For example?”

“She can’t even wield a sword. She is quiet and likes reading and singing. She is not arrogant and doesn’t have an imposing aura.”

“Altina… I think that is normal for girls.”

“Eh?”

At this point, Regis was situated in the northern borders, far away from the capital.

He had been exiled.

So he didn’t know about the dark currents of the palace and the assassination plan of the First Prince.

* * *

The Imperial capital Versailles had no walls.

The city was built on flat plains, and the beautiful sights of the city could be seen from afar.

And situated in the center of the city was the palace ‘Le Brane’.

If one could see it from the sky, they will see that it was a large cross shaped building, with four smaller courtyards and one large courtyard right in front, divided into zones of various sizes.

The palace was where the royals reside, and the place where the Empire made all political and military decisions.

The residence of the grand nobles was built around it. Not just the houses of nobles living near the capital, but also the villas of nobles from territories far away.

The zones were segregated by walls and doors, watched over carefully by guards. A commoner would be stopped ten steps into

the area, and would be surrounded by soldiers if they had a weapon.

To the north of Le Brane with its white walls and blue roof was the residence of the First Prince.

It was a domed shape building that was known as a bird cage, a four storey building.

A tower like structure with the top having the shape of a hemisphere.

There were paintings drawn on the curved walls and a luxurious chandelier hanging from the dome shaped roof.

All four of its windows were covered by thick curtains, making it as dim as the evening in the middle of the day.

On the cushion made from animal skin was a golden container.

The clear water in it had a deep blue light about it.

The master of the house stood before it.

“Ugh…”

Pale fingers dipped a silk cloth into the water.

And gently wiped a slender neck.

It then wiped a pale white face, thin shoulders and tender arms.

After that, the wet silk was used to clean the bulging chest that was becoming harder to hide every passing day.

“Hmm…”

After touching the cold water, the tips slightly hardened.

It was possible to cover it with cloth for the time being, but it would be troublesome to conceal it completely.

There were two sets of door in the room, and the servants used the smaller one.

Adults would need to bend before they could enter, but the one who entered clumsily was a child like maid. Her name was Lilim, she had

brown skin and her black hair was tied up into twin tails.

“Ara, Prince Auguste, as you bathing with cold water again!?”

“… I just started.”

Her soft voice was as clear as a girl, her body that she was wiping was as slender as a woman. The First Prince August was actually a lady.

She turned her back to Lilim.

“… Help me wash my back.”

“It’s an honour.”

The maid approached with a sigh of admiration, and started to gently wipe Auguste’s pristine body with wet silk.

“Prince Auguste, if we don’t hurry, it will be terrible if someone else see this. If Prince Latreille saw this, he will hang us.”

“… Yes,”

Lilim lifted Auguste’s silver hair and wiped her neck.

“Is it cold?”

“… Very.”

“Of course… I prepared hot water, but it’s cold now, what’s with you?”

Auguste glanced at the side table besides the bed.

There was a book there.

“Fairy tales again? I know you are bored, but please take care of your body!”

“… That itches.”

When Lilim wiped her butt, Auguste’s body trembled slightly.

Lilim frowned.

“The skin will turn red if I wipe too hard.”

“… It’s fine… no one will see anyway.”

“Erm, it might be fine for now… But the Consort will scold me later.”

All the maids in this cage like courtyard were employed by Auguste’s mother, the Second Imperial Consort.

She did this with the excuse of giving the best care possible to the Prince. She also ordered the girl to take on the role of Auguste.

It would trouble Auguste if the maids get scolded.

Truthfully speaking, the maids didn't even know the girl's real name.

"... I will do the rest myself."

"I understand. I will fetch your clothes."

After Auguste cleaned her legs, she put on her pants and wrapped her chest with thick clothes. She couldn't wear female clothing outside, so all her attires were for men.

She wore her clothes with Lilim's assistance.

It was a military uniform with a blue colour base.

As it was decorated with gold and silver accessories, it was rather heavy.

*It's just like shackles*, she thought.

"... I want to take it off so much."

"In the afternoon, the new guard commander assigned by the War Administration Ministry will be here, so be ready for the meeting."

"... Another one… Trying to persuade me to give up my succession rights in a roundabout way."

"I will intrude and say the doctor is here to check on your health at the appropriate time. It won't take long, so please bear with it."

"... Alright… Thank you."

Auguste squatted down.

As this was a room for men, there was no dressing table.

Lilim needed to do the make up for the tender face of the girl. She had to look the part of a frail patient.

If the real Auguste was alive, he would be 24 years old. No matter how frail a man was, it would be troublesome if he looked like a young girl. After all, the girl was just 14.

"... The same as usual."

How long would she need to live like this? Could she keep this up forever? Until she is exposed and executed for Lèse-majesté?

“What’s the matter?”

Lilim asked with her head tilted while she brushed her hair.

“……”

The girl pretending to be Auguste covered her lips lightly. Even if she said the things on her mind, it would just trouble the loyal maid serving her.

After she could pass easily for a sick patient, she lied back onto her bed.

—— I will read some books before the new commander comes.

She loved stories.

Especially heroic tales about princes.

It’s fine even if others laughed at her childish dreams.

The girl really likes stories of princes rescuing imprisoned princesses.

* * *

Baudouin was 45 years old.

As the head of an Earl house, his life had been relatively smooth. He didn’t participate in battles that were beyond his capabilities, and performed his duties well.

Although he didn’t have outstanding war merits, he was complimented for being reliable. He received a recommendation from his predecessor who was retiring and Field Marshal Latreille. Also, he was appointed as the commander of the Imperial Capital Guards.

Assuming that nothing goes wrong in the next five or ten years during

his appointment, he would be able to retire officially with a considerable bonus and territory.

*The secret to a long life is to not attempt to do anything beyond my own limits,* Baudouin thought.

Because of his personality, he was careful in collecting intelligence related to the capital, but won't pay much attention to anything that happens outside.

Even if the nobles hosting parties in the palace snubbed him, Baudouin will remain unmoved.

At this moment, an anxious person arrived.

"So you are here, Lord Earl."

"Isn't this… my Empress, I hope you are feeling well."

Even her extravagant clothes and thick make up couldn't conceal the intimidating air about her, like a predatory carnivore. Baudouin didn't have powerful prowess, but he was still a soldier. Even so, he couldn't help trembling.

The Empress opened her fan and covered her lips.

"There are times when I feel moody too."

"Ah ha…"

"The people in the party are always talking about that wench who was exiled. Mentioning the name of that filthy girl will only result in bringing down the taste of the entire palace."

"You are absolutely right."

The Empress was infuriated by the bard who sang praises of the Fourth Princess Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria, so she exiled the bard and chased the Princess out of the palace. This all happened last autumn.

The Earl was terrified by the childish arrogance of the Empress.

For this crazy woman, the palace was like a toy box. Baudouin and

the others were like a toy in the box and would be thrown away mercilessly if they angered her.

Speaking of which, Marie Quatre who was thrown into the rubbish bin appeared to have accomplished a lot of war merits at the borders. She was just a 14 years old girl, there was no way her appointment as commander would change the war. Even though everyone felt the same, the nobles were still interested in talking about her.

It wasn't accurate to say that Baudouin had completely no idea about what was happening in the boondocks 100 Li (444km) away.

"... They probably… won't be talking about it tomorrow. There are just intrigued by news from a faraway land. Please don't mind it, Your Majesty. The chirping of the sparrow won't reach Le Brane."

Referring to Marie Quatre in such a way was dangerous, but he could get on the good side of the Empress if he said it at such a time.

The Empress covered her face with her fan, so her expression was hidden.

She then folded the fan silently, placed her right hand before her face and then pointed to the door at the far end.

*Follow me into that room* —— That was probably what she meant.

Baudouin nodded silently.

Signing with a fan was a method that young aristocratic ladies would use occasionally, so they could move away from the eyes of the public with a man they favour.

Or in other words, a code used by flirtatious women.

However, this was the Empress and it was impossible for such intimate things to happen.

They walked to the room next door.

It was a dim room where the sunlight couldn't reach.

Akin to a cage to lock ferocious beasts.

Like a venomous snake stirring, the Empress spoke:

“When will that man die?”

It was only natural that the Empress wanted her son, Second Prince Latreille to take the throne.

Even though they received support from many influential nobles, the First Prince Auguste still refuses to relinquish his succession rights. But he didn’t attend to his official duties either, so his health became a topic of his suitability to retain his succession rights.

Although the Emperor agreed to the proposals submitted by Prince Latreille, he kept dragging on the issue of succeeding the throne.

If Auguste took the throne, Latreille would lose his succession rights forever. It would be unwise to force the Emperor to make his decision without knowing how he truly felt.

The best way about this was to wait for Auguste to die from his illness. But that would be up to God.

“… But ever since that incident, the First Prince locked himself in the annex and refused to come out… Even his meals are prepared by a designated chef.”

The explanation was to prepare food that won’t worsen his illness and is easy to swallow.

Even the maids were people brought from the Second Consort’s home territory.

“They are splurging their money for the sake of achieving their goal.”

“Well… All the maids are related to their house, so it isn’t that much trouble for them. If we are not careful, our plans would be exposed…”

If the assassination plot was made public, they would be charged with the attempted murder of royalty. They would definitely lose their heads.

Even the Queen who was could swallow the entire palace like a *loup gris* would not be an exception.

“Then send some men to kill him.”

“H-How could…”

Baudouin’s heart pounded hard.

Since the security of the palace was under his purview, this method was plausible.

“Please have mercy… I won’t be able to shirk the responsibility…”

No matter how the Empress tries to push the blame for the assassination away from Latreille, the suspicion would always linger.

The Empress unfolded her fan to conceal her expression.

Although there wasn’t anyone else except for Baudouin in the room, this has become a habit when she devises her schemes.

“If the rules for the access control of security personnel laxes, you would definitely be questioned about that… But what if it is a situation beyond your control? Maybe I will arrange for a small scale movement of personnel.”

“Ugh… if you can set up a proper reassignment of security personnel that won’t be criticized…”

It wasn’t impossible, a demotion could be arranged if a grand noble wishes for it.

After all, Latreille held authority of the military.

The venomous snake whispered from behind the fan.

“Earl Baudouin, you only get to come back to the capital because of your merits in suppressing a rebellion. But in the end, the commander of the guards is just a watchdog… Don’t you want a place in the palace?”

“Eh!? T-That…”

The palace was a place where the government executive offices such as the War Administration Ministry and Ceremonial Ministry were located. If he could join these ministries, promotion to a Marquis would no longer be a dream.

Baudouin clenched his fists and his palms sweated.

"... However, if someone managed to break in despite the heavy security, there would be an uproar in the palace. And I am not the only one responsible for security, the commander of the First Army, Prince Latreille would be implicated too."

"Find a way."

"Ughh…"

The snake that bewitched the immaculate children of god to eat the fruit of knowledge couldn't hold a candle to her.

"Don't you want the position of a Marquis, Earl Baudouin?"

The Earl started sweating profusely.

He found it hard to even breathe.

"... There is such a man… He has a distinguished reputation… But his ability doesn't match his fame. The new head of the famous noble house renowned for being the deputy of the L'Empereur Flamme and incredible martial prowess. However, he didn't achieve much merits on the battlefield."

They could avoid criticism by appointing a reputable knight to take on the security. And if he wasn't capable, they could avoid any problems in the assassination plan.

The Empress narrowed her eyes.

She kept her fan and said:

"Alright. Use that fellow."

"I will start preparing at once."

Baudouin bowed deeply.

* * *

Southwest of Belgaria Empire.

The rebellion of Earl Trosa resulted in a civil war.

Even though he had plenty of resources, the Earl didn't have the army to match, so everyone thought the rebellion would be put down in no time.

However, the commander of the Sixth Army dispatched here was rather incompetent and together with the news that the Earl employed an excellent band of mercenary, both sides came to a stalemate. A campaign that should have ended in half a month had now dragged on for half a year.

The soldiers thought they could return by autumn, but it was almost year's end, and morale in the regular army was at its lowest point.

The soldiers spent all day drinking and gambling, even the mansion which was converted into a temporary headquarters stunk of alcohol.

Angry shouts erupted from the headquarters.

"This happened again, Eddie!"

"Yes yes… it happened again…"

The bald general yelling his head off was the commander of the Sixth Army.

The youth with the messy head of hair, Eddie, had a troubled face.

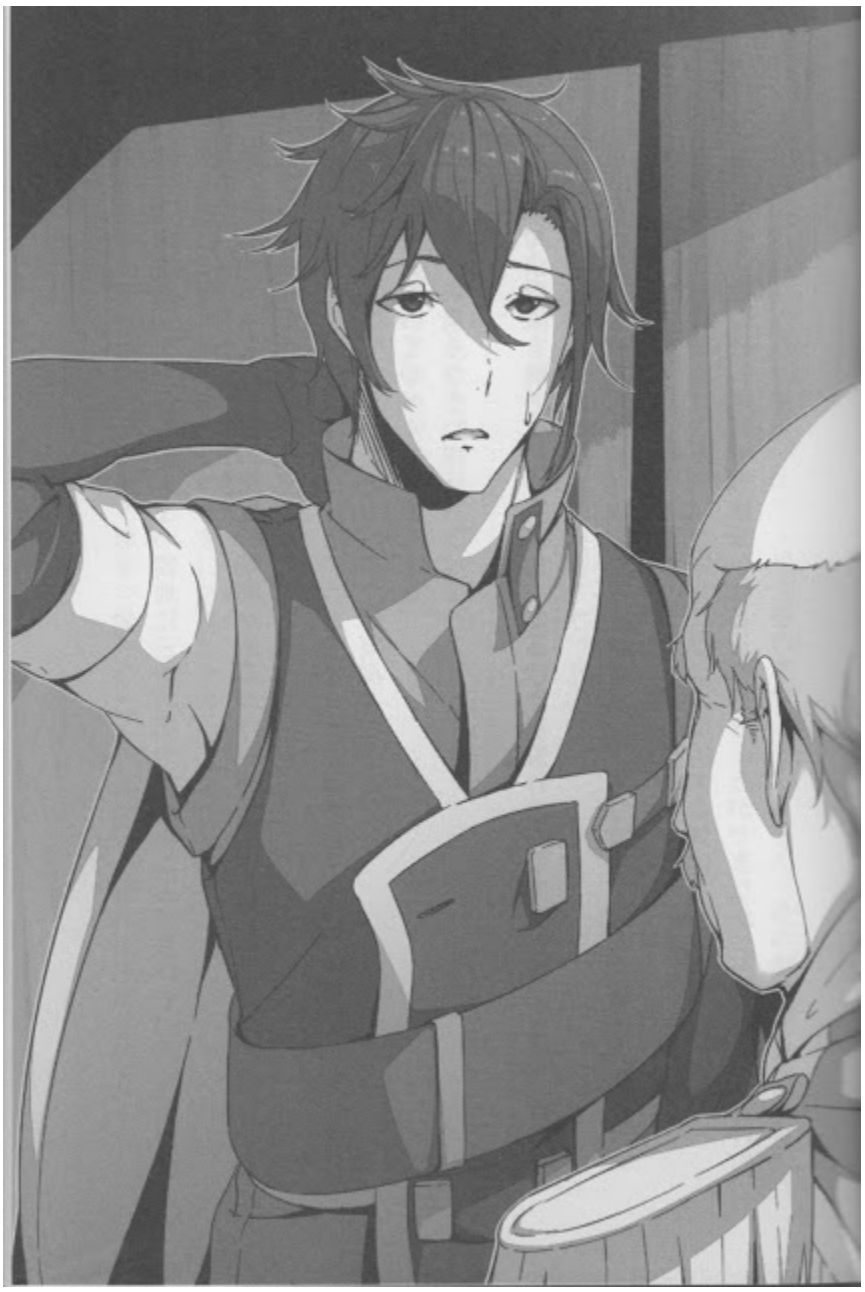
He was about 19 years old.

His dressing was more extravagant than the soldiers around him, but his feathered cape was in tatters, his clothes were a little dirty and his sword was wrapped in by a piece of cloth.

"When will you start thinking about achieving war merits!? Don't you have any drive at all!? You lazy knight!"

“I do have some motivation… But it’s such a hassle…”

“Aren’t you from a prestigious sword family!? Wouldn’t it be a shame to your Duke house if you don’t earn proper war merits!? How many battles do you think it has been!?”



“That’s true… Attacking a territory that didn’t have any large defensive fort with three times the forces, but we fought so many battles…”

“W-Why you! Are you doubting my commanding ability!?”

“Ah, no, I’m not… doubting anything…”

*I am sure of it* — Eddie swallowed these words back. He could criticize the problem with Trosa's strategic approach, but it was true that he didn't carry out his mission properly.

The top of the commander's bald head reddened.

"Don't get cocky!"

"Ehh…!?"

"After inheriting the head of a Duke house at such a young age, you must be letting it get to your head! But I am your boss in the army! Stop it with your rebellious attitude!"

The commander was a viscount with the rank of Brigadier General, while Duke Eddie was a First Grade Combat Officer. But it was a fact that the commander held the highest authority in a unit.

But he didn't say anything nasty or felt rebellious.

It's just that Eddie didn't have any kills in the battle a few days ago.

Such cases weren't limited to the recent battle though. Many of Eddie's forebears didn't achieve merits in battle despite being hailing from a prestigious family and bestowed with the treasured sword.

The commander showed an annoyed expression.

"Is the treasured sword of L'Empereur Flamme hanging on your waist just a decoration!?"

"Well… It will be great if it is just a decoration…"

The sword wrapped inside the cloth was 'Defendre Sept'.

In the warring era where the Empire was founded, the founding Emperor bestowed this treasured sword to the head of the Balzac house that accomplished outstanding results as his right hand man.

From then on, the treasured sword was passed down the generations.

"… This thing is heavy."

“Are you in cahoots in the enemy!?”

“No, how could that be!?”

There was a sudden knocking on the door.

“Who is it!?”

The commander yelled with the same tone he used on Eddie.

The door opened.

An officer of medium built stood there. He was in an elegant uniform decorated with medals. He didn’t look like someone participating in a civil war in such a rural place. Four lightly armour knights guarded his sides.

“... My apologies for interrupting when you are busy… I am Lieutenant General Baudouin from the Imperial Guards.”

The commander of the Sixth Army turned green and saluted flusteredly.

“N-Not at all! Lieutenant General Baudouin… from the capital!? Ugh… But… Eddie, don’t say anything rude!”

“Ehh? Hah…”

Did the commander who was yelling just now mix up his memory?

Leaving that aside — *What is a high ranking general from the Imperial Guards doing in this boondocks* — Eddie was surprised, but still saluted quickly.

Baudouin returned the salute properly.

“Duke Eddie Fabio de Balzac, can you come over here?”

“Huh? Yes Sir.”

Seemed like Baudouin was here for him.

How troubling.

Really troubling.

He couldn’t run away, so Eddie nodded.

Baudouin said in a sincere tone:

“I am responsible for the security of the capital, and have a request that I must ask of you. Please lend me your aid.”

“Ehh? Me?”

“A war of attrition at the frontlines can’t bring out the full potential of your powers, lord Duke. No one other than you can save the Empire, so please…!”

“Wait, wait! There are many things I want to retort but… I am not that capable.”

“That’s right!”

After working under the Sixth Army commander for half a year, this was the first time they agreed on something.

What a touching scene.

However, Baudouin didn’t back down.

“I got the approval from the War Administration Ministry, please let me finish.”

He took out a document, an official appointment letter from the War Administration Ministry.

The approval for transfer of personnel.

Oh right, Baudouin said and took out another document.

“The First Imperial Army will despatch 300 armoured knights from the capital to support the Sixth Army to cover the duties of the Duke, so please…”

The commander’s face changed immediately.

He leaned over with astonishing speed and placed his hand heavily onto Eddie’s shoulder.

“Lord Duke! For the sake of the Empire, I am saddened that a

valuable combat asset such as yourself is transferred away, but I am filled with joy at the same time! Long live the Empire!!”

His words didn’t make sense anymore.

Just a reinforcement of 300 knights, did he need to be so excited… Well, that was normal, compared to the duke with just an empty title, the knights would have a real chance of turning the tide of battle.

Eddie knew where he stood, so he didn’t protest about what the commander said.

Baudouin’s eyes closed a little and nodded.

And so, Eddie got on a wobbly carriage and headed for the capital that very day.

* * *

It was a special carriage painted emerald green.

Eddie sat on the couch that was as soft as the clouds and enjoyed his journey.

Or rather, he was worried about dirtying the velvet on the couch.

He was wearing a feathered cloak that looked tattered, black uniform the colour of coal, but didn’t have any armour.

His black hair that stood out had not been groomed, drooping down messily over his eyes.

He was tall with broad shoulders and had a good physique. But he was always saying depressing things, giving others a weak impression.

Eddie, Baudouin and two young servants were seated on the carriage. The other knights were posted around the carriages as guards.

Eddie was told about his new place of work during the journey.

“— You want me to be Prince Auguste’s guard?”

“That’s right.”

Baudouin was a Lieutenant General while Eddie was a First Grade Combat Officer. Peerage wise, they were a Marquis and a Duke, although Baudouin held a higher rank in the army, he had to use a respectful tone.

“… His Highness’ health is frail, in order for him to recover as soon as possible, the place can’t be too noisy. It will be best to have a small and elite group.”

“I heard about this before. His body isn’t doing too well.”

“Has the Duke met His Highness before?”

“I haven’t seen him in the last six months…”

He came from a Duke house, and was close to the royals. He would meet them several times a year during festivals.

Eddie didn’t meet Auguste after he fell ill because of his deployment to the frontlines.

“But speaking of which, being a guard in the palace… That’s a first for me…”

“Not interested?”

“No, I am looking forward to it since I never tried it before. But can I live up to your expectations…?”

“The work itself isn’t too hard. The First Imperial Army is stationed outside the capital, the area outside the palace is also heavily guarded. You won’t need to worry about that.”

Eddie tilted his head.

“Am I really needed?”

“Instead of soldiers he doesn’t know, His Highness will feel more at ease with Lord Eddie whom he is acquainted with.”

“I see… It’s true that it would be harder to relax in the presence of a stranger… And being around the people in the palace is already stressful.”

Baudouin smiled wryly.

Noticing that he had misspoke, Eddie covered his mouth.

“Well… House Balzac is the number one swordsmanship clan in the Empire. If the young head of the House could be his guard, I am sure His Highness can rest easy.”

“That might be so… But I just happen to possess a good sword…”

Eddie sighed.

Baudouin composed himself and changed the topic.

“By the way, Lord Eddie… Most Dukes would lead their own army and wouldn’t take the field themselves. Why didn’t you bring any troops with you, and instead fight in the frontlines alone?”

It was only natural for him to ask.

How should he put it in a way that will make Baudouin understand? Eddie shook his head.

“Well… The soldiers will die if you send them to the battlefield right?”

“Yes, that’s true.”

Baudouin seemed to be wondering what Eddie was talking about.

*As expected, he won’t understand just from that* —— Eddie thought as he continued trying his best to explain.

“I don’t like to see gory scenes.”

“That is really…”

“It might not sound right for a knight to say that, but I think it is better to not fight at all.”

“Even though House Balzac is famous for its swordsmanship?”

“I hate killing the most, followed by swords. Because this is an instrument to kill right? I would prefer it if this thing doesn’t exist.”

Baudouin looked at the sword on Eddie’s waist.

The sword wrapped in cloth was the one he hated the most.

Eddie shrugged.

“Father is gone. He said ‘an opponent I must defeat appeared’, pushed L’Empereur Flamme’s sword and the title of Duke to me… then left on a journey of swordsmanship.”

“I-I see.”

From Baudouin’s reaction, he didn’t really accept what Eddie said.

It couldn’t be helped, he was already used such gazes from others.

Eddie shrugged again.

“Speaking of which, the capital huh. It’s been six months, I hope grandfather’s health is okay…”

“Lord Baltasar is doing well.”

“I see… In that case, I should visit him, even if I can only bring a duck.”

It was a journey that took half a month by carriage ——

On a clear afternoon, they finally saw the beautiful city.

* * *

When the carriage arrived at the capital, it was already noon.

Baudouin who alighted first bowed his head deeply.

“My apologies, Lord Eddie. We arrived later than expected.”

“Please don’t worry about it.”

Instead of disturbing the peace of the palace by arriving at night, the

original plan was to rest at a checkpoint nearby, then enter the capital in the morning. They were slightly behind schedule.

Eddie entered into the capital after being away for half a year.

The two carriages passed through an arch gate slowly and headed into the palace.

It was the back gate for the staff working inside, instead of the front gate. But this gate was grand too.

The walls and pillars were carved with beautiful pictures, and the floor was as smooth as a mirror.

“This is the first time I am entering through here. So that’s what it’s like.”

“I beg your pardon… After all, it would be better to meet Prince Auguste earlier.”

“Right.”

Baudouin walked beside him.

The four knights and other servants followed behind.

The palace was where government executive bodies such as the War Administration Ministry and the Ceremonial Ministry were based. To attend to the needs of the staff living here, many servants stayed here too.

And so, large kitchens and bathhouses were built inside the palace, and countless servants busied themselves.

Baudouin frowned.

“My apologies to show you such a disorderly sight.”

“It’s fine, I like this. I can feel that the people are alive this way… Ah, I don’t mean the contrary is bad…”

Maybe Eddie’s words were counterproductive.

But it wasn’t an excuse, and he didn’t mean to criticize the nobles.

He was just bad with his words.

He didn't understand why gems and silk dresses needed to exist, and how it was different from the leaves lodged onto the fur of a cat rummaging through the grass.

Unnecessary.

If there were clothes to cover oneself, food to satiate hunger and houses to shelter from the elements, that would be enough, Eddie thought.

Even though he was a Duke, he felt the sword of L'Empereur Flamme on his waist was an unnecessary burden.

But even if he discards these responsibilities, he would still need to shoulder the consequences for abandoning his duty. After all, he had the obligation to take over the House. From such a perspective, instead of responsibilities, it was more like a shackle.

"—— Hmm?"

They were walking on a path that the servants couldn't use. Several soldiers were patrolling it.

A sight that didn't surprise Eddie.

Those were the palace security. A lounge was located inside, and the officers of the First Army frequent this place.

But Eddie felt something was different.

"... What's the matter?"

It wasn't a problem with their dressing, they were wearing the uniform of the regular army properly.

The air about them felt wrong. Their upbringing and experience felt different from the soldiers he had usually seen the palace.

Soldiers from the frontlines?

*No*, Eddie shook his head.

They were like mercenaries.

The soldiers inside the palace would walk and speak with their companions in a relaxed manner. It was the safest place in the Empire after all. But these men were guarded as if they were on enemy grounds, gawking around like freshly hired mercenaries.

It was a group of six.

Walking before them was a man who stood out among the group.

He had narrow eyes and thin lips. A man whose face bore a scar from a knife wound.

Eddie felt a sudden chill.

It was instinct.

The reason wasn't clear.

—— This person is really strong.

If this was the battlefield, he would probably not hesitate to yell at the comrades around him to run.

The man with narrow eyes stopped about three paces away.

He placed his right fist to his chest in a salute.

The other men were a step slower in giving a stiff salute.

Baudouin showed a sour expression.

"What are you all doing? Didn't I tell you not to go outside… In the day…"

"We had too much of a drink."

The narrow eyed man answered as he appraised Eddie. Their eyes met.

He placed his right hand on top of his sword.

"……"

“.....!?”

Eddie took a step back with his left leg at the same time. He thought about how he should defend against a slash from the opponent.

Baudouin didn’t seem to notice the instant of tension and sighed in resignation and said begrudgingly.

“Ask the maid if you need a drink. I will be troubled if you return to the palace after drinking those cheap wine outside.”

“I get it… But it was more boring than expected, but things seem to be getting interesting.”

The narrow eyed man led his group away.

Eddie could feel the cold sweat on his back.

After the soldiers were gone, Baudouin took out his handkerchief to wipe the sweat on his forehead, and said with an awkward smile.

“Sorry about that, Lord Duke.”

“W-Who were those people?”

“Ah, they are not people you need to be concerned with.”

“They don’t look like soldiers garrisoned in the palace… It’s rare to see men like them even in the frontlines.”

Baudouin looked surprised.

After thinking for a moment, he said:

“... Guess I can’t muddle through it… They are men recommended by a noble who hired former mercenaries as regular soldiers. But even if they are capable, they are not suited for guard duties in the capital.”

“That’s true.”

“We are looking for a unit that can take them in.”

“I see.”

Eddie was still uneasy, but there was no reason to refute this as a lie. Since Baudouin had his own plans to about it, Eddie didn't dwell over the matter.

* * *

Eddie was led to an annex building with the nickname of 'Panier' (Birdcage).

A conical building shaped like a tower.

There were soldiers patrolling the courtyard, but no guards could be found inside.

After informing her master about the visitors request for an audience, the maid opened the door.

The stairs inside the tower spiralled upwards, Eddie and Baudouin were led up slowly by a child like maid.

Baudouin said as they walked.

"The first floor is the kitchen used by the exclusive chef of Prince Auguste, and the place to store things related to food."

"I see…"

*Did they strengthen security because of the news of poison assassination?* Eddie thought, but didn't say it out loud.

"The second floor is the Prince's wardrobe and military wear."

"Military wear huh."

As the door was shut, he couldn't see inside. It was probably stocked with armours and swords. Auguste always had a weak constitution and never took such things to the field before, but was he such a vain person?

"The third floor is where the maids are on standby. They can respond immediately when the bell rings on the fourth floor."

“That’s convenient.”

“Lord Eddie’s room would be on the third floor. But I can arrange a room for you in the main building if…”

“No need for that, since I’m a bodyguard, I should stay as close to my master as possible.”

“I understand. Do tell the maids if you need anything, or you can ask me too.”

“Thank you very much.”

There was a white door right in front of the stairs leading to the 4th level. A maid that came from another passageway opened the door with a key and they finally reached the 4th floor.

At the end of the stairs was Auguste’s room.

It was a half spherical room that looked like an inverted bowl.

In the middle of the room was a canopy bed, with thin lacy curtains hanging from it.

Eddie could see a silver haired man lying inside.

He felt that something was wrong.

—— Did Auguste’s body become smaller?

It had been a year since they last met. Auguste was thin back then, but he had gotten thinner still.

Was it because of his illness? Or his posture that made him seem smaller when looking through the curtains?

Baudouin bowed deeply.

“Your Highness, it has been a while. I am Lieutenant General Baudouin from the Imperial Guards. This is an old acquaintance of yours, Duke Eddie Fabio de Balzac.”

“… Yes, I know that of course.”

A strangely muffled voice.

Cough cough, Auguste cleared his throat several times.

Seems that his illness was affecting his throat.

He then informed the child-like maid:

“It will be terrible if they catch my disease. Please don’t come near me.”

Baudouin nodded.

“Your Highness isn’t feeling well, so I will keep it short. Please pardon me if I am too forward. I think having too many soldiers access the Annex building would be detrimental to Your Highness’ health. That’s why I would like the head of House Balzac who inherited the sword of L’Empereur Flamme to be your bodyguard. If the Duke is here, we will just need a hundred guards to secure the building.”

“Hmm… that’s great. You have my thanks.”

“……”

Eddie lowered his head without a word.

Baudouin took out a file and placed it on the table before Auguste’s bed.

“The details are written inside, this concludes my report.”

“… Very well.”

“Yes. If there is no other issue, I will take my leave.”

Baudouin bowed deeply once again.

After some brief words with Eddie, he followed the maid who led him here down the stairs.

Only Eddie and Auguste who was lying on the bed were left in the room.

“... Sir Eddie… If you require anything, you can just approach Lilim.”

“Ahh, that maid just now?”

“That’s right.”

Eddie tilted his head.

“What’s the matter, why are you calling me so formally… You always called me Eddie in the past.”

“Eh…?”

“Didn’t you say we can converse like friends when no one else is around? Well, we aren’t kids anymore, so acting in a way befitting our stations is to be expected.”

“T-That’s right.”

“Haha… We haven’t met for a year after all. But I did visit you when you fell sick, Auguste. But the doctors stopped me because your condition was really bad.”

“... I see, my apologies.”

“Ara, that’s not like you. I thought you would say ‘you should have come to visit me even if you needed to blow the doctors away’. I didn’t do that though.”

“... Ugh… Cough cough!”

“Ah, are you alright, Auguste!?”

“... Ugh, yeah.”

He must be feeling unwell, Eddie thought worryingly.

“Speaking of which, making me the bodyguard… I thought Auguste would definitely reject that.”

“... Why would I do that?”

“Why… Because you know I don’t like hitting people.”

“Eh?”

Eddie thought he heard the voice of a girl for an instance and was baffled.

Auguste started coughing behind the curtains again.

It must have been his imagination. Auguste was sick, so it was better not to ask too many questions.

“I went onto the battlefield a few times recently… But it is still no good. Even though Auguste said ‘the enemies are just like wolves’… I still can’t do it. People die when they are killed. I really hate killing people.”

“… How kind.”

“But Latreille said ‘those who run from their duties are despicable’.”

“……!!”

Auguste who was behind the curtains inhaled sharply.

Eddie asked in confusion.

“What’s the matter?”

“… Latreille is the despicable one.”

“Huh, you are not holding back at all.”

“… I was targeted by that fellow before… I don’t know when he will assassinate me again.”

Eddie shrugged.

“So that incident half a year ago was really an assassination attempt?”

“… That’s right.”

How ruthless — Eddie thought.

When Auguste and Latreille were on good terms and played together when they were young, Eddie already knew the two of them.

Because they were about the same age and bore the same duty, the brothers had to fight each other, which was regrettable.

“Auguste, do you still want to be Emperor?”

“… If I give up my succession rights, Latreille will become Emperor. This is the only thing I won’t allow.

He sounded gloomy.

Eddie could sense his intense hatred.

After leaving the capital for half a year, Eddie could feel that the relationships between the brothers have deteriorated further.

“Auguste…”

At this moment, the maid who sent Baudouin away returned.

This must be Lilim.

“Sorry for the wait, Duke Balzac.”

“Just call me Eddie. I will be in your care.”

“Yes, please take care of me! Well then, allow me to lead you to your room, Sir Eddie.”

“Understood — I will be going now, Auguste.”

“… Alright.”

Eddie’s room was in one of the rooms on the 3rd level.

It was too small for a Duke, but just right for a First Grade Combat Officer.

This was the lodging given to a bodyguard, so Eddie moved in for now.

There seemed to be a story behind this.

—— The Second Consort insisted that the guards must be from her own territorial army.

However, guarding the royals was the duty of the Imperial Army. This was an important job, and would be a slap to the face for the Army even if the replacement was the noble house army from the

First Prince’s mother.

In the end, they compromised with the Imperial guards securing the outside of the Annex building, without posting any soldiers inside, and that was the situation now.

The Second Consort knew Eddie, so she probably trusted him more.

But it was hard to know how she really thought… If she didn’t trust Eddie as a bodyguard, it would be equivalent to saying that the Duke House is part of the assassins, so she couldn’t refuse.

By the way, powerful nobles would form their own house troops, and these nobles would be given the rank of officers and become commanders.

Eddie was the only person who took up a posting as a normal officer in the army despite the status of a Duke.

* * *

Auguste’s life changed a little after Eddie moved in.

First of all, she couldn’t take hot baths when she wants to. After all, she had to hide the fact that she was a girl from another person living under the same roof.

Actually, the girl saw Eddie a few times when they were young.

The girl was still a girl then, and the people around called her by her real name ——

Back then, the princes Auguste, Latreille and Bastian played together.

As she was a girl, she could only look on from afar…

Speaking of which, there was another girl who was slightly older than her, Argentina who played with swords and horses with her brothers. She felt that girl was strange, because women from royalty and nobility were usually raised on the standard of being virtuous and quiet.

She was the only one who didn't play with them.

Just watching them quietly from afar.

But there were times when they spoke. When Eddie was practicing with his sword alone in the courtyard, she didn't think too much before approaching and talking to him.

She was eight and he was thirteen then.

Maybe he forgot about that already.

—— Do you like swords? I think they are scary.

She told him that… If she thought about it carefully, she was disrupting his training. So she would prefer for him to forget about it.

But no matter what, their positions were different now.

She couldn't let him know she was a girl.

The next day ——

Eddie visited Auguste again.

"Morning Auguste."

"... What's the matter?"

"Nothing, just bored. Let's play cards. The weather is nice today, a good day for hunting, but you don't really like going outside."

"... If you are bored, you can go out and play by yourself."

"You might say that now, but you will get angry later if I really went out to play by myself."

—— Speaking of which, that's how Auguste was.

Auguste sighed when she recalled how her brother was.

"... But we can't play cards. You will catch my disease if you come too near."

"It's fine! I heard from the other maids, they all started working here

half a year ago, and no one resigned yet. Which meant that your illness is not contagious even when they worked close to your side."

"... Ugh."

All the maids in the building had been carefully taught by Auguste's mother, the Second Consort, in order to not reveal Auguste's secret.

So if they were asked about Auguste's illness —— they would answer such questions properly.

But if the maids were asked about themselves, they wouldn't be that guarded.

Auguste shifted the topic back.

"... Alright, I will play cards with you. What do you want to play?"

"Isn't August great at poker? Let's play that."

"... No, t-that isn't good."

Poker and the likes were games played by boys.

It's gambling.

Auguste didn't even know the rules.

Eddie tilted his head.

"Hah?"

"Ughhh… Let's play Seven Bridge."

"That's not a two player game. Want to call for the other maids?"

"N-No need…"

No matter how well the maids had been taught, they might still slip something during a long game. Lilim was probably the only one that would be fine.

"Well, the maids have many things to attend to… Let's play old maid."

“Yes!”

She answered in her original voice, then tried to cover it up with a cough.

That even surprised herself.

She didn’t really like card games, so why was she so happy?

Spending everyday lying on a bed, living her life as if she had been cursed by a witch.

Eddie’s suggestion let her catch a glimpse of light.

“I will deal the cards then.”

Eddie distributed the cards with a practiced hand.

“... You are skilled at this.”

“What are you saying, aren’t you the one that taught me?”

“Eh?”

“Don’t go too far with the sick act, in the past, you kept using the excuse that you are feeling unwell to skip on your studies and sword training. But you were actually practicing cards and throwing knives…”

“!?”

—— Was brother such a person!

A shocking truth.

Eddie dealt the cards, then picked up one pile and placed it on the table in front of the bed, right beside a book.

“Hmm? ‘The blue prince and princess of thorns’...? Isn’t this a woman’s book?”

“Ah, wahh!”

She lost her composure for an instance.

She forgot to keep it after reading it last night.

“T-This is… Erm… Lilim’s book.”

“Why is it in Auguste’s room?”

“She just forgot and left it in her master’s room. What a clumsy maid, she’s still a child.”

She apologized to her maid in her heart.

Eddie seemed to have accepted this answer.

“Well, it happens —— Alright, let’s start the game.”

“Yeah.”

Auguste reached her hand out of the curtain.

It had been so long since she took something without the maid being an intermediary. Why did she feel so happy over such a trivial matter!?

The cards opened up in her hands like a treasure.

“… This one.”

She paired the cards and placed them on the table.

Seemed like the old maid is in Eddie’s hand. He spread the cards in his hand and offered it to her.

“Here!”

“Yes.”

She suppressed her pounding heart and drew a card from her opponent’s hand.

It was a two spades.

She had a two clubs, so she put the pair onto the pile at the side.

To let Eddie draw her cards, she held the cards in both hands and offered them to him.

“... Here.”

“Hmm, I pick this one.”

“Right.”

Since it was just the two of them playing, they could make a pair if they didn’t pick the old maid. Eddie removed a pair from his hand.

It was Auguste’s turn again.

Of the two cards before her, she had to avoid one of them.

—— *The opponent wants the old maid to be drawn, so he will put it in a place that is easy to draw.* Auguste thought.

“Hee.”

“Hahaha, you picked that one!?”

“Hyaa!?”

She drew the old maid.

How mean.

She was tricked.

Should she use the same trick on him —— No. He will see through it.

Auguste wasn’t that dumb.

But as she thought about such things, she was completely engrossed in the game of cards.

They played old maid until it was afternoon, and she was taught how to play Rummy, in which Eddie strutted his skills…

Eddie only went back to his room before dinner.

It was like a dream.

During dinner, Lilim asked:

“Erm… Prince Auguste… I heard the screams and laughter of a girl, did something happen?”

She only realized how she had acted when the maid reminded her

Getting into the bed because of shock and fear, she was really going to sleep this time.

But it was still a fun day.

* * *

Eddie was troubled.

"... Oh no. This is bad… It will be terrible if this goes on."

He had worked as Auguste's escort for a week.

Something that might cause the demise of House Balzac happened.

—— He thought Auguste was really cute!!

Auguste's interest in games enamoured Eddie's heart for some reason.

Simply put, he was very cute.

Be it his smile when he wins.

Or his sad voice in defeat that even made Eddie feel sad.

But most of all, his eyes that looked forward to the next game and his happy smile when a game begins lingered in Eddie's mind.

Eddie dreamt about him three days in a row now.

"... Oh no… Auguste is a man! He is a royal that is older than me, how can I say that he is cute!?"

Eddie was 19, and Auguste was 24. Something must be wrong since Eddie thought Auguste looked younger than him.

As the head of the Duke House, Eddie had the duty to ensure his lineage lived on.

His spouse had to be a woman!

After Eddie finished his dinner consisting of chicken meat, he began his daily swordsmanship training.

He couldn't swing his sword in the house, so he had to wield his sword at the entrance of the Annex.

"Hah! Hah!"

He kept swinging as if he was trying to clear his mind.

He didn't bring his treasured sword as this was training, and used a heavy training sword instead.

After sweating it out, he felt a bit more relaxed.

Someone flew out from the shadows of the building.

That person stabbed at Eddie with a sword!

"Hee!"

"Huh!?"

Eddie dodged the sword in the nick of time.

He countered at the same time. Being hit by the heavy training sword was no joke.

"Ahhh!"

"Hmmp!"

His opponent pulled back his sword in an instant to parry Eddie's strike.

He then kicked at Eddie.

Eddie kicked too.

Their feet collided and both of them flew backwards.

The face of the opponent appeared before the dim evening sun——

"Grandfather!"

That was Eddie's grandfather Baltasar Basil de Balzac.

The old man with a wrinkled face smiled.

“Hyahahaha!”

“Want to continue!?”

“You already came back to the capital a week ago! And you didn’t even visit me, you stupid grandson!”

His grandfather might be saying that, but his face was all smiles.

Eddie parried an attack, countered, and was blocked.

“I have work as a bodyguard and can’t make time!”

“Then write a letter!”

“I was thinking about bringing you some duck meat!”

“I see, I look forward to that… How’s your work, can you handle it!?”

“Ughh… Of course!”

They exchanged blows more often than they spoke, and the two of them finally pulled apart.

Huff, huff, Baltasar regulated his breathing.

“I’m getting old… losing my breath just from that…”

“That’s normal for twenty rounds of exchanges.”

Eddie said without any difficulty in breathing, and greeted.

“—— You look well, grandfather.”

“Yes. So you… are now a guard of a royal… uuughhh…”

“W-Why are you crying!?”

“You said in the past that you don’t like to kill people and didn’t achieve much in the battlefield, so I thought that’s it for House Balzac… But hearing consecutive good news made me feel blissed.”

“Did something happened?”

“Yes. You remember Princess Argentina?”

“Of course. I have never seen anyone stronger than her… But I haven’t seen her after we grew up. I am not sure how she is doing right now.”

The nobles in the Empire will start preparing for their debut in the social world at the age of ten. Girls would need to learn a lot more things, and would be taught not to meet with men freely.

Eddie hasn’t met Altina much since she was ten.

As the only girl that played with him in his childhood, he remembered her well. But he hasn’t seen her much since then —— he lamented.

“Shortly after you set off on your campaign, Princess Argentina was appointed the commander of Fort Sierck on Prince Latreille’s recommendation.”

“Huh?”

Eddie then learned of the details of the incident from Baltasar.

“—— And so, I heard happy news of victory.”

“That girl is really amazing.”

“Maybe she got a great strategist.”

“No… Just her winning a duel against the Black Knight Jerome was enough to shock me…”

“Why don’t you head over there and challenge them?”

“I don’t want to win either of them.”

“Ughh… How shameful! All the sword skills you learned are crying right now!”

“Aren’t they all skills for killing people? Wouldn’t it be better if the problem is solved without needing to use them?”

“These are the techniques our forebears took 850 years to perfect!”

“Ah… This topic is going to take a long time so let’s stop here.”

Eddie waved his hand.

They have repeated this several times already, so Baltasar was used to this.

“I see. Well, no matter what, you are fulfilling your duties and Princess Argentina is doing great… I am really happy. What a fortunate life. I won’t have any regrets even if I die now. Or rather, it is great that my life will come to an end without any troubles.”

“W-What troubles?”

“For example, you losing your job. You will keep working here, right?”

“Well…”

Baltasar narrowed his eyes.

“And… Hmm? Will you let me see my great grandson? If that is the case, I will live until I’m a hundred if need be.”

“Ah, eh… No erm… When the time comes.”

He was 19 after all, a normal age for marriage.

Some people in Belgaria got married at fifteen, twenty was already rather late.

It wouldn’t be strange to see people with two or three children at Eddie’s age.

“You left the capital for half a year, so at least bring back a bride!”

“I’m there to fight a civil war! And things like getting married and h-having kids, I will do that!”

Of course he will get married.

And have children.

If he doesn’t do that, the Balzac family line will end. Eddie didn’t have any brothers.

He needed to leave behind a successor to inherit the sword skills.

How well that successor learns them would be dependent on the child…

As he was thinking about what to do, he should respect the will of his father, grandfather and forebears.

That might be so…

When the topic of wife and kids were mentioned, the first thing that came to his mind was Auguste's face.

That was a huge problem.

"Ughh…"

"What's the matter? Is it an immoral love? Lusting after a married woman is no good, but a commoner is fine."

"I don't need you to worry about such unnecessary things."

As expected of an elder who lived for so long.

Immoral love huh.

That seemed right.

"... Grandfather… Must I marry someone who can bear a child?"

"Of course."

Waahhhh… Eddie grabbed his head.

Baltasar face became serious.

"By the way, grandson."

"What is it, grandfather."

"Do you know about the Le Dragon du Fer?"

"Ahh, I heard they are powerful mercenaries."

This mercenary band was involved in the civil war that was still ongoing after half a year, so Eddie was familiar with them.

"They are really skilled, and are good at abductions and

assassinations… Not only are they strong, there are rumours that they undertake dirty jobs.”

“Well, they are mercenaries, and will do anything for money.”

“… They seem to be here.”

“Eh?”

“They are in the capital.”

“What!? Why are they…!? Who hired them!?”

“I don’t know. But my source is reliable… Not just hired, they will probably do something illegal.”

“That might be so… But this is the capital.”

“Aren’t you concerned?”

“I’m a bodyguard for the Prince, so it’s fine. After all, it is impossible for mercenaries to attack inside the palace.”

“That’s why I’m telling you about this. Now that you it is dangerous here, you can avoid it right?”

“… That’s true.”

Or rather, did grandfather state this name because it might affect Eddie?

“… Grandfather… Do you know the name of their captain?”

“His name is Damian. I heard that all the soldiers in Le Dragon du Fer put poison on their swords.”

“Poison huh… Instead of dragons, they are more like venomous snakes.”

Eddie thought about the narrow eyed man he met a few days ago.

# Chapter 2 - Auguste, the silver Princess

## Part 2

“... Eddie… You can’t… If you do that...”

“It’s fine Auguste… See… Ah, what?”

“... It’s stuck?”

“No, I will just do it slowly… It should probably… work.”

“... Eddie is really hard headed.”

“Quiet, this way, slowly… See, it works right?”

“Ah… N-No… It’s going to collapse ——

The blocks fell from the table.

Blocks in various colors and sizes crumbled and fell onto the floor.

“Ahh.”

“... Eddie always goes after the large blocks. Just pick the small ones.”

They are playing Jenga today.

It’s a game where you remove one block at a time from a tower of blocks. The game can only be played with one finger, and had a lot of rules.

“I didn’t think it would fall.”

“... I already told you the green one would do.”

“Well, I made it fall, so Auguste won… Isn’t this such a game?”

“... I know, but if both of us didn’t make any mistakes, wouldn’t it be more fun to keep taking the blocks out?”

“That’s true.”

Eddie tidied up the blocks as he laughed.

* * *

It had been two weeks since he arrived at the Annex as Auguste’s guard ——

“... Eddie, I have something important to tell you.”

Auguste looked at Eddie with a serious expression.

Eddie sat up straight.

“What?”

“... A certain merchant will be coming here this evening.”

“You want to buy something?”

“... I left the procurement of essentials to the servants, but… the issue this time is that the art merchant has to give an item as a gift to the royals in the capital.”

“I see.”

If the royals possessed such an item, the other nobles would purchase something similar, that’s the idea behind it.

For art merchants, their customers were naturally nobles. If he want to make a name for himself in the social world, he had to promote his merchandise properly.

“Which means this is my first bodyguard duty. I won’t let my guard down even if he is an art merchant, don’t worry.”

No matter what status the opponent had or how he looked, it wasn’t possible to see through their plan or read their thoughts.

“... I feel easy now.”

“Is that enough? I know nothing about appraising art work. I couldn’t even tell which side was up for the paintings in my own store room.”

“... I am not expecting you to appraise the art, that’s not the problem. I need to dress up for the reception, so you can’t come into my room for a while.”

“Dress up huh.”

Auguste nodded.

His face turned slightly red.

His action was completely different from usual, and Eddie felt weird looking at him.

“... That’s all… Listen, you must absolutely not come in.”

“I understand.”

Eddie nodded, then put away the blocks, cards, darts, Senet and chess. There was a lot.

“Erm, should I call for the maids?”

“... Yes.”

With a ring of the bell, Lilim came in a short while later.

With a kettle in hand.

“Prince Auguste, I brought the hot water… Eh, what’s this!? A guest will be coming today!”

“… Yes.”

“Hahaha, we have been playing since morning, and I brought over all these toys before I realized.”

“If the guest sees this, he will think you have head problems, and start weird rumours!”

“I-It’s that bad!?”

“The head of a Duke House playing children's games with the prince inside the room, isn’t there something else you should be doing!?”

“Sigh, I have nothing to say.”

She was closer to a home teacher instead of a maid, Eddie smiled awkwardly.

Auguste pulled his shoulders in, and looked even smaller.

Lilim poured the hot water into a large container.

The other maids were also coming in with kettles.

“Just leave the tidying up to us. His Highness is going to take a hot bath now.”

“… Yes.”

“Sir Eddie, please return to your own room!”

“I got it.”

Eddie bowed to the Prince and then descended down the stairs. His room was right in front of the third floor stairs.

Lilim might look like a child, but she was a dependable person. She didn’t seem to be someone who would forget her belongings in her master’s room.

Auguste was acting strange.

He was obviously different than before.

When Eddie first arrived and they spoke sparsely, he thought it was because of Auguste's illness.

But it was impossible for Eddie who was aware of his own denseness to not notice after spending time with Auguste for so long. He was too different.

—— What is he hiding?

He accepted the duty of guarding the Prince. If Auguste was still a Prince of the Belgaria Empire, there won't be any problem.

"Just… What am I thinking…"

And so, things like thinking he is cute —— Such things don't matter.

After reaching the 3rd level, the door was closed and the footsteps of the maid preparing hot water faded away.

"Phew…"

Hearing the sound of a man showering made Eddie's heart race.

How strange.

He had never seen such a beautiful and cute man his entire life.

"... The Duke House is done for, Grandfather."

Eddie didn't return to his room, and gazed out the window.

He heard the sound of something shattering.

And the scream of a woman.

Eddie moved without thinking.

He kicked open the door he just left, and unwrapped the sword at his waist.

He leaped up the twisting stairs in an instant.

“Auguste!”

Standing there was Auguste who just took his clothes off.

By his feet, there was a smashed vase, and a maid who was bowing her head in apology beside him. It wasn’t Lilim, but another maid he didn’t know the name of.

Not just that.

Eddie’s eyes were drawn in by Auguste.

He couldn’t shift his gaze.

He wondered if Auguste was thin and frail because of his sickness, but now, he found out that Auguste’s skin was smooth and pale.

A slender body completely unlike that of a man’s, with a bulge that men didn’t have. A small belly button and small waist, and the thing that should be below his lower abdomen was missing, just a thin bush.

“… What is this?”

“… E-Eddie…”

“Wahhhh!”

Lilim was the one who screamed.

She threw the vase in her hands out.

It hit Eddie’s face splendidly, and shattered.

But Eddie was unmoved. His face turned pale and he didn’t dare to move.

“… Auguste… Turned into a girl.”

He was talking gibberish because of the shock.

“… Sigh.”

After breathing out softly, Auguste’s eyes closed.

And collapsed as if all his strength had been sapped.

“Auguste!”

Eddie threw the sword of L’Empereur Flamme ‘Defendre Sept’ aside, running up the stairs in large strides.

Reaching out his hand, Eddie grabbed him ——

No, Eddie grabbed her.

—— Just in time!!

He barely made it before her white and supple body fell onto the floor that was covered in shattered glass.

After closing the distance as if he was sliding, Eddie managed to protect Auguste.

Auguste was like a puppet with its strings cut in his arms.

“Phew…”

Eddie breathed a sigh of relief.

Lilim who stood stunned at the side rushed over in that instant.

Her face was green.

“Ah… Ah…”

“I think you should give me a clear explanation about this entire incident.”

Lilim fell silent.

And lowered her head.

When she lifted her head again, Eddie could feel that she had braced herself.

“Thank you very much for saving Prince Auguste… I will explain properly, but first, let’s carry her to the bed.”

“Right.”

Eddie put his arms around the back and knees of the exhausted Auguste, and picked her up.

How light.

Eddie even suspected that she wasn't human.

He lifted his gaze to avoid looking at her skin, and walked slowly in order to not trip.

The maids opened the curtains of the bed, and laid out a blanket.

Eddie placed her onto the bed.

He will leave the rest to the maids.

Lilim carried a chair over.

"You just need to hear my explanation? Or…"

"That's true. I am very concerned about this… But I should wait for Auguste to wake up. Another thing, please tell her that 'Eddie didn't see anything, but if you wish to explain, I will be happy to listen'."

"Could it be, you want to pretend you didn't see anything?"

"Well, yes, that's it."

Eddie stood up and walked down the stairs.

"I ignored my promise with her first because I heard the scream of a maid, so it's my fault. It can't be helped if I am executed for ignoring the Prince's orders."

"Ah… But, that's a natural course of action for Sir Eddie to take as a guard right?"

"That's why I will leave the rest to you. I meant it when I said I forgot."

"Are you going to report this to Prince Latreille…!?"

"I may be a soldier, but I'm not working for Latreille. I didn't have any orders to investigate Auguste's body."

“Sir Eddie…”

“That’s all.”

“Ah, you are bleeding.”

“Hmm?”

Blood flowed down the back of his hand.

He must have been cut when he slid across the floor to catch Auguste.

“It will heal in no time.”

“I see… But I should bandage it for you.”

“Hmm? Thank you.”

After applying medicine, the wound was wrapped in bandages.

Eddie then picked up the sword he threw out onto the passageway and returned to his room.

* * *

Evening.

Auguste woke up after hearing news that the guest was here.

Eddie was summoned too, and stood guard at a corner of the room.

The guest was an art merchant wearing many jewelries, with heavy rings worn on all his fingers. Several finely crafted gold necklaces hung on his neck, making Eddie wonder if he was here to sell them.

Because of the gem hanging from his ears, his earlobes were pulled down, making Eddie scream in his heart ‘donkey’.

Behind the donkey was a large package carried by four people, which should be the painting.

The donkey approached Auguste who was lying in bed.

“I am deeply honoured for my audience to be granted. It’s something so glorious that I won’t forget in my entire life. As if my forty years of life is for this prestige. When I was still a poor artist and no one bought my paintings, I was hired by the art merchant from one generation ago…”

“Erm, Prince Auguste isn’t feeling well, please keep it short.”

The merchant who seemed to have prepared a long speech frowned because Lilim cut him off.

However, he didn’t dare to criticize the maid in front of royalty.

He cleared his throat.

“I apologize for my long greeting.”

Seemed like his failed attempt at a speech was just a greeting.

“I am here today to report that our art merchant guild will be setting up a shop in the capital. Right at the junction of Versailles road, which is in front of the palace, and Jean Galula street. The opening of the shop will be a breath of fresh air for the aging building…”

“Erm…”

“Ah, if you can grace us with a visit, you will see a large signboard. Aside from reporting this, I am here to present you with a wondrous painting on behest of the art merchant guild. I promise it will please you.”

What amazing confidence. Since the time of the previous Emperor, the palace of Belgaria started collecting masterpieces from the art world, and he dared to brag about this gift before the Prince who was indoctrinated since young!?

“... Yes.”

Auguste didn’t react much.

Or rather, her eyes were resting on Eddie in the corner.

Ever since that incident in the afternoon, she had not been able to speak with him. No, she probably can’t speak with him from now

on…

Auguste was distracted.

Lilim said softly to the art merchant who was working hard.

“Prince Auguste has not eaten yet because of his illness, and he isn’t in a good mood. He might get irritated if you let him wait too long.”

“Ughh… You are right. I will start now.”

The art merchant and his four servants opened the package deftly, with the merchant himself doing the final unveiling of the painting.

“Please look at this!”

Eddie was standing behind the art merchant’s group, so he couldn’t see anything.

Auguste who was on her bed didn’t say anything.

Lilim was the only one who screamed.

“Beautiful! How beautiful! Your Highness, what do you think! Oh I see, Prince Auguste is really happy too!”

“… Erm, is that so?”

“Of course! I served under Prince Auguste for so long, so I understand his speechless expression after seeing something beautiful!”

“Ohh, is that so. As expected of His Highness, not shouting out like normal people. I am glad this pleases you, that is…”

“… Hmm?”

“… Erm?”

There was an awkward tension in the air.

The donkey had a face full of expectations. However, he must be feeling anxious since Auguste didn’t say anything.

Lilim thought for a moment.

Auguste didn’t say anything and kept looking in Eddie’s way.

Eddie didn’t have the artistic expertise to butt into the conversation between the royal and the art merchant. He was in no position to do so, and didn’t intend to.

Lilim clapped her hands.

“That’s right, I have to tell the reporters to write an article! To publicize the news of Prince Auguste accepting this beautiful painting! Right?”

“Oh! That’s true! I can relax after hearing that. I will be counting on you then!”

“Are you leaving now? Please come this way.”

“Yes, sorry for bothering you for so long. Please hang it somewhere prominent! It is a famous painting that nobles will fight over after all!”

“I understand!”

With the matter settled, Lilim escorted the donkey and his servants out.

The room was quiet once more.

Eddie and Auguste were alone again.

Together with that giant painting.

Auguste said softly:

“... Move it away.”

The voice of a girl.

When they were engrossed in games, her screams were actually in her original voice. It felt poetic when she said it in this tone so calmly.

Like the gentle wind blowing over the surface of the lake.

“You want to move it away? You don’t like it?”

“... It’s a painting of a war.”

After Eddie looked at it, he realized this was a painting of brave knights slaughtering barbarians and enemy soldiers.

“I see.”

A prince might be fine with it, but this wasn’t a painting you would gift to a girl.

Lilim probably didn’t even need look at Auguste to know that she should hang it in a place where the guests could see it.

“It seemed to be a valuable painting…”

“… I am not interested in money.”

That’s true.

Eddie placed the painting in a corner of the room, with its front facing the wall.

“Auguste, will this do?”

“… Yes.”

“I will take my leave then. It’s about time for dinner.”

“…. Eddie, wait.”

“Yes.”

“… Take a seat.”

She probably didn’t mean sitting on the floor.

There is only one chair in the room that was placed before the bed.

“Erm, well… alright.”

He walked to the bed and placed his hands on the chair.

“… No.”

“Ahh, pardon me… I should be sitting on the floor.”

“… Here.”

The lace curtains were drawn back.

Eddie gulped.

There was a hint of sadness on Auguste's face, but it was so beautiful that it took his breath away.

He would like to put it on a frame and display it.

She patted the side of the bed.

".... Here."

"Eh? S-Sit… there?"

Eddie felt nervous for the first time in his life.

* * *

He sat slowly on the edge of the bed.

He thought he was sitting on clouds when he took Baudouin's carriage, but he learned that he was wrong.

That was just high quality leather seat.

This was the real clouds.

The lace curtain on Eddie's side was drawn again.

"Erm… Auguste…"

Her face was really close.

Not too long ago, he thought his feelings were strange because Auguste was a man, but it's different now.

Eddie felt from the bottom of his heart that Auguste was really charming.

He wanted to comfort her sorrowful face, but Eddie exerted his utmost restraint to stop himself from reaching out to her.

Auguste said slowly:

“... Do you know… about that incident half a year ago?”

“Is it about… Auguste fainting after dinner?”

“... Yes.”

“What happened?”

She bit her lips, and ——

“... The real Auguste was murdered.”

“What!?”

After hearing that, Eddie finally understood everything.

Even though he understood, that sentence was still too simple. Eddie couldn’t figure out the details with his clumsy observation skills.

And he only know about one person with silver hair and crimson eyes.

“Then, who exactly are you?”

“... I am… Auguste’s little sister… Felicia.”

“Eh!?”

“... We conversed once in the past.”

“Is that so?”

Eddie searched through his memories hard.

But he couldn’t recall meeting this girl with silver hair and crimson eyes.

Auguste —— no, Felicia sighed.

“... It was just that one time after all.”

Seeing her on the verge of tears, Eddie felt a flash in his mind.

“That’s right! You are that kid who hates swords!”

“Ah…”

Felicia's eyes widened.

"But I only remembered about you! Your words shocked me back then, so everything else is a blank to me."

"Ugh… Sorry…"

"I am afraid of people dying, so I hate swords… Something like that. Yes, I remember what you said to me. I never thought about that, and how scary that was."

"Eddie…"

"That's right, I already forgot who said that. I only kept those words close to my heart. I know that a girl said that… Thanks to that, I am afraid of girls… Ah, but I am grateful to her."

"... Grateful?"

"Ahh, I will swing my sword when I feel troubled. But there are problems I couldn't clear my mind of no matter how much I swung. But I finally understood. I hate swords. I hate killing people. So in order to not be killed, I have to become very strong."

He cleared his doubts when he was thirteen. How had his sword changed since then?

Felicia tilted her head.

"... Eh?"

Eddie scratched his head.

"Haha, I am really bad at explaining things…"

He was already used to not being understood. It entailed understanding the fear of death after all. But that was why he picked up his sword, which would feel contradictory to her.

"... I don't really understand, but… I am touched that you remembered me."

"Auguste's sister, Felicia huh… How nostalgic. No, I have been seeing you all this while, so that sounds weird."

“Yes… How nostalgic… to be called by this name… Finally… Finally… I feel that I am meeting Eddie for real.”

“That’s right.”

Felicia’s eyes grew misty.

Clear droplets of tears slid down her cheeks.

“... After brother was murdered, I was… brought here by mother immediately.”

“I see, letting you be the replacement?”

“Yes.”

“Others might feel something is a bit off, but after seeing your silver hair and crimson eyes, they will think of you as Auguste.”

“... I returned to my mother’s home after I was ten… So I wasn’t seen in the public much…”

“Well, normal girls wouldn’t be out in the open that often.”

“... But, do you remember Argentina?”

“Eh? Erm, well… She is special.”

He heard his grandfather mentioning this name a few days ago.

Eddie broke out in cold sweat when he remembered what happened in their childhood.

It seemed that news of her defeating the Black Knight wasn’t just a rumour, there really were many heroic deeds about her.

Felicia narrowed her eyes slightly.

“... You like her?”

“Hahh!? Felicia met her before right!? Argentina is stronger than I am, I always thought of her as a man!”

“... T-That’s true.”

More accurately speaking, they didn't get to meet much, so feelings for the opposite sex didn't have the chance to grow —— Eddie thought.

"Stronger than Bastian, better in horse riding than Latreille, and she picked up swordsmanship faster than me… I haven't seen her recently, but I heard she won against the Black Knight hailed as a hero of the Empire in a duel recently."

"... Huh"

Felicia covered her mouth.

Eddie shrugged.

"Instead of strong girls, I prefer cu… cu…"

"... Huh?"

"... Do the maids know that you are actually Felicia? What about the other servants?

He muddled through it.

Eddie who showed no fear before powerful enemies, didn't have the courage to say that line.

"The chefs don't know… But the twelve maids do… Others include my mother, the butler, the people helping with my disguise, and that maid… That's all…"

That was more than he expected.

"Count me among these people then. Ah, but I don't want to offend the Second Consort, so not letting her know will be better."

In the worst case scenario, she might poison Eddie to keep the secret under wraps.

Both the Empress and Second Consort gave Eddie an impression of horror.

Felicia raised her head baffled.

“... You are not telling?”

“Huh?”

For an instant, the words he avoided saying surfaced in his mind, but Felicia didn’t seem to be referring to that.

“... You are not going to tell the things about me… to Latreille?”

“Didn’t you hear from Lilim? I won’t do that. I am not a pawn of Latreille anyway.”

“... I believe you.”

“Well, my orders are to protect Auguste. Even if your real identity is Felicia… I will still protect you.”

“... Thank you, Eddie.”

“It’s a promise. So I hope you can tell me —— What are your thoughts about this.”

Being imprisoned in the Annex as Auguste, and chained to the bed.

She grabbed the sheets hard.

“... Latreille… murdered brother… I won’t allow such a man to be Emperor.”

“I see.”

“... So I… Until the Emperor passes away, I will be staying inside my bed like this.”

“I understand…”

If the Emperor dies without appointing a successor, there wouldn’t be any doubts that Auguste who was first in the line of succession would take the throne.

Latreille will then lose his succession rights forever.

There would be many problems if Auguste didn’t have any successor…

The Second Consort will then take in the daughter of a noble related to her, pretend to marry and have a child with Auguste, and use someone's baby as a stand in.

"A perfect plan… But this is a grave crime that cheats everyone in the Belgaria Empire right?"

"... If you want to run, this is your chance… If Eddie wants to resign from the job, I will help you."

"I just promised to protect you, how could I say such things to spoil the mood?"

"... Eddie just wants to act cool."

"I am a man after all."

"... I… only feel that I am a girl now… Eddie."

"Eh? Oh, okay."

Eddie's heart raced as he looked into her eyes.

He was breaking out in a sweat.

And turned stiff.

Felicia laid back onto the bed and closed her eyes.

Her light coloured lips were breathing fast.

Her neck was red.

Eddie felt his throat drying up.

If the maid Lilim happens to enter at this moment, or if Eddie's grandfather visits… Even though Eddie was considering all these possibilities, he was unexpectedly calm.

The sun set and the remnants of its red glow vanished.

Only the flickering candle light on the walls shone onto Felicia's face.

Eddie placed his sword on one side of the bed.

Then reached out and touched her forelock.

The laced curtains moved gently.

What a quiet night.

* * *

Felicia who was acting as Auguste didn't spend the entire day engrossed in games.

He summoned ministers, invited merchants, and showed an interest in performing his duties even though he was still in bed.

Even though Latreille still controlled the military, Auguste started getting involved in the taxation issues with local nobles, and arbitrating the disputes between aristocrats.

The situation slowly changed as the First Prince mediated.

Eddie stood beside the bed as the bodyguard.

Felicia was just fourteen, and was unfamiliar with politics and law. However, Lilim displayed astounding talent and came up with many correct proposals, and Felicia learned a lot from her.

Today as well ——

The minister of commerce bowed respectfully after getting a judgement regarding his dispute with a local authority.

Lilim who was hiding inside the blanket to think about the problem pushed her head out tiredly.

"That one just now is troublesome."

"… Thank you. It's great that we can resolve it."

Felicia expressed her thanks, and Eddie nodded.

"Ahh, I learned many things too. Even though there is a contract, the interest rate is still too ridiculous. Wouldn't it be resolved easily by calculating an appropriate interest rate and paying it?"

“The issue is to find the appropriate rate.”

“I-I see.”

Even though Eddie watched the whole thing, he couldn’t even figure out what the problem was.

Eddie scratched his head.

“... Let’s call it a day.”

Lilim smiled with ease when she heard what Felicia said.

“That’s great. It will look suspicious if you are so passionate about learning all of a sudden.”

“Yes…”

“Ah, that’s right, the papers had news about the painting that was gifted a few days ago.”

“... Is that so.”

“It seemed that a famous painter drew it before he passed away. I praised that art merchant greatly in Prince Auguste’s tone.

And probably gave a lot of money to that reporter.

“... Instead of that kind of people, I hope to meet those who want to serve the nation.”

“Yes! Ah, it’s almost time for dinner! Please wait a moment!”

“... Yes… Eddie, after dinner…”

“Ahh, got it.”

As if to make up for the time lost in the day, in the evening, Felicia calling out Eddie’s name became an everyday sight.

* * *

“... Eddie… Faster…”

“Don’t be so hasty, I can’t see clearly because it is too dark.”

“... But Lilim will get angry if we keep the candle lit.”

“Well, it isn’t good for a patient to stay up late.”

“... I am always lying in bed and can’t sleep at night, how boring.”

“I know, that’s why we are doing this.”

“... Yes, so hurry up.”

“I-I get it. Right, this one!”

Eddie turned over a card lying face down on the floor.

The number was different from another card that was facing up.

“... Damn it.”

“Let it go ahhh!”

“... It’s actually this card.”

“Wahhh! It’s the one besides it!”

“And this… and… this…”

“I lost again! Felicia is good at this.”

“... Fufu.”

This is a game where you turn over a card, and try to find another card that had the same number. If the numbers don’t match, you will have to turn them back.

A memory game.

They spent all their time after dinner playing this.

They did spend some time discussing the day’s event though.

Felicia who was excited about games acted just like her age. Perhaps, even younger.

A warmth flowed through Eddie’s heart when he saw her like this. He

only patted her head that night, but now, he thought that was a pity!

But Eddie wanted their relationship to stay like this. After all, Felicia was actually a princess. That was a fact even though she was pretending to be Auguste.

Right now, the two of them didn't dare to act recklessly because of the obligation they had towards their House.

"... But a kiss…"

Felicia mumbled.

"Eh?"

Eddie returned to reality after making a rare show of pondering.

"... But you keep this up… You will win next time right?"

Felicia covered her mouth in a panic and said.

"Ah, haha! That's true! You are right!"

That surprised me, did I mishear...

Eddie collected the cards and shuffled them.

"Well then, this will be the real battle!"

"……"

Felicia wordlessly turned over two of the scattered cards facing down on the floor.

It didn't match.

"... Eddie?"

"Quiet."

He said in a cold voice.

That surprised Felicia, whose expression stiffened.

Eddie unwrapped the sword on his waist.

“I heard a scream just now…”

At the same time, the door used by the maids opened, and without any knocking, Lilim ran in.

“Run!”

“…!?”

Lilim suddenly squatted down with her hands over her face.

There was a sword wound across her back.

“Ahh.”

Her petite body trembled, and Lilim vomited blood.

“Lilim!?”

Felicia cried out her name.

The honest, exemplary and young maid held Felicia’s hand.

“Please run… and live on.”

“No, don’t die Lilim, I don’t want this!”

“Please hurry… Princess… Felicia.”

With her breathing ragged, Lilim closed her eyes and collapsed. Her face was deadly pale.

For the first time, Lilim addressed her by her real name.

But Felicia didn’t want it to happen under such a situation.

“… No… No… What should we do, Eddie!?”

“Please calm down. The best doctors and medicine are in the palace. If we can get her help in time, she will survive.”

“We have to… get a doctor…”

“Ahh, got it, so please wait.”

Eddie drew his sword.

And faced the door Lilim entered earlier.

Six dark figures already sneaked in.

* * *

They wore black clothes, covered their mouth and even covered their hair with a black bandana.

They had swords with a green glow in their hands.

“Huff huff…”

Their breathing was quiet.

Eddie pointed at them with his sword.

“You are from Le Dragon du Fer?”

“Bingo.”

Said the leader of the six. He was a man with a solid built.

He held a longsword and a dagger.

Compared to large swords and axes, a poisoned blade could kill much quicker with just a flesh wound.

His companions took similar stances, and seemed really experienced.

The room wasn’t cramped, but there was still no place to run.

Felicia carried Lilim to the bed, and Lilim panted painfully after passing out.

Turning his back towards the two of them, Eddie readied his stance.

“Guess I don’t need to ask you dumb questions like what you are after.”

“Fufu… ‘The Duke that can’t kill’, as expected of your name. Duke Eddie Fabio de Balzac.”

Eddie frowned after hearing what the leader said. That was a sarcastic name he got on the battlefield, with the commander being the first one to use it.

Eddie didn't kill despite being on a battlefield, that's why he got such an unglamourous name.

"Let me make this clear, I will not hold back."

Behind Eddie were a girl panting painfully and a girl he had fallen for.

"Get out of the way, Duke!"

Even though the one who shouted was one man, three people attacked at the same time.

While the large man attacking from the front thrust his sword out, the other two went to both of his sides and blocked Eddie's escape path with their swords.

If Eddie focused on the enemy in front, he would be caught between the attacks on both sides. If he tried to fend off either side, he will be hit from the back. Even if he drop down, he would be attack from the front.

"Swords that can kill… I will break them!"

"!?"

Eddie wielded his sword.

He didn't plan to dodge from the start. Behind him was Felicia, who was the enemy's original target —— They were definitely here to assassinate Auguste.

Eddie first blocked the sword coming from the left.

A clinking sound echoed.

The blade that was glowing green shattered.

"What!?"

The enemy gasped in surprise when he saw the sword breaking.

This technique was created by utilizing the extreme toughness of the treasured sword, and Eddie was probably the only one who uses them. A technique to break the enemy's weapon…

He pulled back the sword immediately and blocked the thrust coming straight at him, and used the momentum to parry the attack coming from the right.

'Defendre Sept' was a weapon with jagged edge.

They were used to catch the enemy's sword.

For normal steel weapons, the smaller parts would break if pressure was applied to them.

However, the treasured sword made from special metal known as Tristei wouldn't bend or break from a little pressure.

Pulling the sword sideways, Eddie used the principle of a pivot to exert a large force on his opponents' swords.

And it required tremendous strength to push an adversary's sword down.

"Hahhh!"

The sword that was slashing towards him from the right shattered.

And the large man who was thrusting from the front was pushed back by a powerful force.

Although a crisped sound rang out, the main body of the blade was still intact.

The green liquid was spilled.

As the tip of his enemy's blade had snapped, Eddie lowered his sword.

"You little!"

"You stepped in too deep!"

Eddie shifted his center of gravity half a step forward, and thrust his

sword forward.

His opponent couldn't react to his swift movement.

Eddie's sword severed the large man's fingers.

There was a splattering sound.

Blood and gore flew out.

"Ahhhh!?"

The large man collapsed backwards.

The other two men on both sides didn't give up as they drew their dagger and attacked.

"Hee!!"

"You are asking for it!"

Eddie kicked the kneecap of the man on the left, bringing him down. Because of Eddie's skill, the enemy didn't look fast to him.

The kneecap shattered.

"Ahhh!?"

Eddie flicked his sword at the same time.

As for the man stabbing at him from the right —— his right hand flew off along with his dagger.

"Ahhh!!"

The two mercenary were pushed back.

There was blood everywhere.

The other two who attacked after that suffered the same fate.

Eddie broke their swords first.

He then sliced off the leg of the man who kept resisting. The other man realized the difference in their strength and tried to escape…

“Le Dragon du Fer never retreats!”

And with a slash, the last man was killed.

That man was definitely the fellow Eddie saw in the passageway before the palace. Even if he covered his face, Eddie could tell from his ominous presence —— and sharp narrow eyes.

The head of the man trying to escape disappeared.

Blood spewed everywhere.

The cards scattered on the floor were dyed red

Felicia screamed.

“Hyaaa!”

“Close your eyes, it will be over soon.”

Eddie got ready in his stance and said.

Cutting off the head with one swing, what extraordinary arm strength and technique. Eddie’s instinct told him that he must not hesitate to run if he encounters this man on the battlefield.

He must be the captain of the mercenary band.

“You are… Damian, right?”

“How knowledgeable, Duke.”

“I have an acquaintance who is a busybody after all.”

Damian stared at Eddie’s sword with his narrow eyes.

“Nice sword. As expected of a sword of L’Empereur Flamme. I thought this would be a boring mission, but it is rather interesting.”

“You are happy about this situation? You are not simple.”

“You too, Duke… You are not a simple person, how else do you explain your great swordsmanship? Didn’t you learn them to kill?”

“Don’t think of me as the same as you. I trained in order to resolve

matters without killing.”

“If you have overwhelming power, you can just break the opponent’s sword and fend them off by wounding them. That’s what you think right?”

Seemed like Damian was knowledgeable about swordsmanship, and Eddie found a man who understood him at such a strange place.

Damian readied his sword.

“If you have such remarkable skill, why do you keep quiet when others mock you? Humans will live to a hundred at the most, and their population will keep increasing if left alone, just like cattles.”

“There are people who will kill others for the sake of survival. But I am not that kind of person. I don’t have the need and won’t do something I hate.”

“You will choose such a way of life if you are born a noble huh…”

“I can empathize with the poor becoming a mercenary. But I won’t permit you to kill good people wantonly.”

“I’m poor? You have such a narrow view Duke, I didn’t become a mercenary because I am poor.”

Eddie had never met someone like this.

He didn’t know any mercenaries in the first place.

Damian continued:

“I am born in an Earl House and lived without freedom. Every day was boring, as if I was locked up in a prison. One day, I killed a servant, and finally felt that I am really living in this world.”

“Such a thing… You are not normal anymore.”

“You will understand if you kill someone. Just by taking a life, you will find that all your troubles are gone.”

“How stupid, you will be trapped in a hell of regret if you keep thinking about others.”

“I am used to not being understood.”

“What a coincidence, me too… But that is why I want to protect the people who understand me, and will not let you get your way.”

“Love huh, I have someone I love too.”

“You have someone you love huh...Then you must understand how precious life is.”

“Ahh, my first love is a young servant… who is the first person I killed.”

“Ughh!?”

*He is insane*, Eddie couldn’t say anything.

He was not a human anymore.

“Enough with the chit chat, back to the main topic. I will take your lives…”

“Never!”

“You, a Duke who only knows a gentle battlefield! Can you kill me?”

Damian raised his sword.

“Hahhhh!”

“Hee!!”

Eddie attempt to block the sword.

By blocking and twisting, he could shatter his opponent’s sword.

A few centimeters before the swords collided ——

Damian pulled his sword back.

He altered the path and renewed his slash.

But Eddie expected this counter.

He changed his posture to parry his opponent’s sword. Assuming that the sword continues on this exact same path, Eddie was

confident that he could block it.

“Is defending all you can do!?”

“That’s my job!”

“Hah!!”

Another slash came from above.

Eddie blocked it this time too, but his body was pressed down.

The sharp sound of metal grinding rang out.

After blocking Damian’s sword, the jagged edge of the treasured sword latched on to firmly.

“Got it!”

“Too naive, Duke!”

Damian let go of his sword before it broke.

And pulled a dagger from the back of his waist.

Eddie had already lost his balance when he tried to fend off his opponent’s sword.

And couldn’t counter swiftly.

Damian thrust with his dagger.

“Die——!!”

“!?”

Felicia and Lilim were on the bed behind Eddie, so he couldn’t run.

Eddie grabbed the sword Damian ditched.

The dagger closed in on his heart.

There was no way to dodge.

Eddie slashed both swords at Damian.

Then, came the sound of flesh being cut.

The two swords cut deeply into Damian’s shoulders.

Damian’s dagger then glazed past Eddie’s chest and down the side of his ribs.

Blood oozed out.

Damian moaned in hatred.

“Decisive movements… You saw through my attack…?”

“Many generations of my predecessors worked to perfect this technique and gain amazing fame. I didn’t see through your movements, nor did I come up with this technique.”

“… Kill me.”

“I refuse. Tell me who ordered the assassination of the Prince.”

“I will die from the poison anyway.”

“E-Erm…”

“And you too!”

Damian’s dagger that missed the mark because of Eddie’s defence spun in his hand, and stabbed towards Eddie.

No time to hesitate.

Eddie ——

Let go of both swords.

And evaded the dagger as if he was falling.

He then kicked his adversary's abdomen from an extremely low position.

“Ah!?”

Damian was sent flying.

The swords fell to the ground.

Eddie picked up the treasured sword and stood immediately.

Damian got up slowly and laughed sinisterly.

“Fufu… Lost… I… lost…”

He was bleeding badly from his shoulders, and the dagger was still in his hand.

Eddie took up a stance even though it was unnecessary.

“If you admit your loss, then toss your dagger away. You should then find a lawyer to defend you in court.”

“You already knew, right…”

“!?”

Lord Baudouin —— Eddie remembered the reassignment orders.

“But I have no intention to go to court, or leave any evidence behind.”

Damian took out something from his backpack, and put it onto a candle.

Eddie widened his eyes.

“That is…!?”

Oil? He wants to burn down the Annex? It’s true that there wouldn’t be any evidence if it gets burned down…

“It’s gunpowder, Duke.”

“!?”

Eddie charged to the bed to protect Felicia and Lilim.

An explosion happened immediately.

Damian’s body was nowhere to be found.

It was the same for the wounded assassins around him.

The glass in the windows was also shattered.

The canopy on the bed was blown off, the bed and ceiling were in tatters.

A fire broke out in the Annex known as Panier.

* * *

A few days later ——

Eddie visited a room in the Palace at the appointed time.

“Pardon me.”

“… Yes.”

The door opened, and Felicia who was dressed up as Auguste stood there.

A smile appeared on her serious face.

“… Does it still hurt?”

“Ahh, it’s fine.”

Everyone in the room already knew the secret, so there was no need for formalities.

Apart from Eddie and Felicia, Lilim was present too.

She recovered safely, and continued working as Auguste’s maid and shadow strategist.

“Prince Auguste, I will wait for you outside.”

“… Alright.”

“I will see you later then.”

After taking her leave, Lilim walked out of the room in the opposite direction Eddie came from and waited in the corridor.

Her wounds still hurt a little, but her detoxification was progressing smoothly.

How fortunate.

“… It’s great that both Eddie and Lilim got medical treatment in

time.”

“That’s right, the poison would have spread had it been a bit later.”

He had no intention of thanking Damian, but they didn’t need to spend time summoning the doctors because of his explosion.

When he regained conscious, the fire was already out. He was carried out of the rubbles of the Annex, and treated by the doctors.

Felicia approached him slowly dressed up like a man.

“… Eddie protected me.”

“That’s my job.”

To everyone around her, Felicia was now Auguste.

It was the same that night too —— Because of Eddie’s valiant effort, she wasn’t hurt and avoided the risk of being exposed.

“… Look at this.”

She sat on the chair and wore the boots that was prepared for her.

“What?”

“After I told mother about this, she made this for me.”

It looked like normal boots that was a bit long.

After she stood up, Eddie found Felicia to be taller.

“… How is it?”

“Ah? I see, so the soles made you taller, I couldn’t tell at all.”

“Right?”

She wore a smile that was the same as the time she won at tabletop games.

Eddie looked at her carefully from head to toe.

“Amazing, it would be hard to imagine you being a woman from your height.”

“... I have always… been afraid of showing myself in public. But I can’t do that anymore.”

“You are right.”

“... As long as Eddie is by my side, I won’t be afraid anymore.”

Felicia looked straight at Eddie.

The face of Felicia who became taller was closer than before, and without her make up to feign illness, she looked beautiful.

Eddie averted his eyes shyly.

“Well, the length of the bodyguard assignment had not been decided.”

“... Will you be dismissed if the orders come?”

“If that happens, I will quit the army. I will be jobless then, but I will be glad if I can find a job with great benefits.”

Felicia breathed in and covered the corner of her mouth.

“... Just keep staying by my side.”

“As your bodyguard?”

“... If Eddie wants to, I will be fine no matter what manner it is.”

“I-I see.”

A sword hung by Felicia’s waist.

It wasn’t just a sword for decoration.

Eddie helped her adjust.

“Here… That’s better.”

“... Thank you.”

“Are you going to attend the party? You will probably encounter a lot of trouble.”

“... It will be fine.”

“Really?”

“... Because Eddie will be by my side.”

That was a heavy responsibility.

“I am not confident in dancing.”

“... Me too, I have never danced the female part before.”

“That’s true.”

“... I need to show to everyone that the First Prince Auguste is still alive. I won’t let Latreille do whatever he wants to the Belgaria Empire.”

After securing the sword, Eddie stood properly beside her.

“I know, I will protect you.”

Eddie unwrapped the cloth covering the treasured sword once again.

He won’t kill.

But he didn’t hate wielding the sword to protect others.

A knocking sound rang out.

Lilim’s voice came from outside.

“... Prince Auguste… The party is starting.”

“Yes.”

Felicia walked towards the door.

“... Carlos Liam Auguste de Belgaria… Liam the sixteenth. Sir Eddie, follow me.”

“Yes, my lord.”

# Chapter 3 - The Promise of the Stars

## Bastian’s tale——

Altina’s brother, the Third Prince of Belgaria Empire who possess extraordinary physical capabilities, Bastian. He was studying abroad in High Britannia.

Because he didn’t want to be involved in the succession struggles and the people around him felt his behaviour was disgraceful, he didn’t stay in the palace.

Steelart Year 42, April 15th —— The Queen of High Britannia passed away.

Princess Elizabeth who was named the successor kept her identity a secret while studying in school, she was also Bastian’s classmate.

The royal knights escorted her towards ‘Queen’s Tower’ for her coronation. But she was attacked by the Margaret faction that was vying for the succession rights. The knights were defeated and

Elizabeth was in a pinch. However, at the crucial moment, Bastian appeared. In order to fulfil the promise of letting Elizabeth read the story he wrote, he chased after the carriage on foot. He said ‘this is expected since we are friends’, and rescued Elizabeth.

Unlike the Margaret faction that was from the pro war faction, Elizabeth believed in peace. With their interest aligned, Bastian agreed to escort her to the royal capital.

After a tedious journey.

The two of them reached the Fort that was nearest to the capital, ‘Gray Bridge’. They wanted to seek the help of the Fort Commander who was Elise’s uncle, but her uncle turned to the pro war faction.

Bastian made up his mind to break through the defences of the huge number of soldiers, and save the trapped Elise from the Fort.

In a duel with the right hand man of Margaret, Oswald Coulthard, Bastian managed to wound his opponent’s wrist, but while doing so, he took a sword to the stomach.

Judging quickly, he jumped into the fast flowing river at the bottom of the cliff.

Even though they survived, Bastian failed to escort Elise to the capital and couldn’t fulfil her wish.

Margaret from the pro war faction was coronated and from that moment, the Kingdom of High Britannia began its invasion campaign under the command of Oswald.

April 23rd ——

The Kingdom of High Britannia entered all out war with the Belgaria Empire.

Days in the Tiraso Laverde House

In one of the rooms inside the house Bastian was lodging in, there was a simple bed, a small chair and a table.

There were plenty of guest rooms like this in the house of an

aristocrat, meant to house the servants of noble guests who visit from afar.

As Bastian's assumed identity was the third son of a Belgarian Earl, he wasn't an invited guest, so he was grateful that he got to use the servant's room.

Elise sat beside the bed. Her eyes were red because she cried earlier.

Bastian didn't have a mirror, but he knew he probably looked the same way.

A bespectacled maid named Shia was standing near the window. She was a girl with bright red hair, about Bastian and Elise's age.

Outside the open window was a courtyard, and the servants of House Tiraso Laverde were gathered there, holding the breaking news report with a serious expression.

"It's war! War is breaking out!"

"Ahh, finally! We declared war against the Belgaria Empire!"

"This is war!"

Shia's face turned green.

Earlier, a maid barged in without even knocking, screaming hysterically 'It's war! Look, the men are all moving!' then rushed off without even closing the door. She probably went to the other rooms to do the same thing.

Because both the door and the windows were open, the chaotic noise from the courtyard was carried into the room by the wind.

Bastian sighed.

"Declaring war on the very day she took the throne, she had already made the preparations."

Elise nodded.

"I am too naive. They already prepared so far, but I didn't even think

this would happen.”

“It couldn’t be helped.”

Applewood was a rural place, and Elise didn’t have any powerful backings there.

It was only natural for her to lose in the power struggle to Margaret who lived in the capital, after all, she had plenty of supporters including her right hand man, Oswald.

Bastian was as troubled as Elise for failing to stop the war.

Shia closed the windows.

The wind died down.

“E-Erm, my apologies for opening the windows without asking for permission.”

“Please don’t worry. Even if you didn’t open them, I would have still asked you to do so.”

Shia was relieved by Bastian’s words.

Even though Bastian was rescued and recuperating on a bed provided out of goodwill, it didn’t change the fact that he’s just the ‘guest of the master’ to a maid like her.

In this era, the position of young servants were weak, and it was common to see them being fired on the spot if they irked their masters.

“Ah, I will close the door.”

Shia walked towards the opened door.

But as she was about close it, suddenly, a figure appeared on the corridor.

She was wearing a top quality dress with her hair pinned up. A young woman about 25 years of age.

“Shia, what is the meaning of this?”

“M-Madame!?”

“How careless of you to leave the door wide open. I can hear you from outside the corridor.”

“Ah, my deepest apologies!”

Shia bowed deeply. But she didn’t clarify that it was her colleague who opened the door.

Bastian lifted his hand.

“May I intrude?”

“Ara, dear guest, is something the matter?”

Even though her tone was polite, the woman that was addressed as Madame looked at Bastian with sharp eyes.

But Bastian didn’t back down.

If he was someone who was intimidated before a fearsome foe, he would have been more docile towards his grandfather and the chamberlain.

“I am sorry, but I am the one who asked her. I just want to ventilate the room a little.”

“Are you covering for Shia?”

“I am just stating the facts. Even though I am not an invited guest and was rescued, this still means that I am still a guest to the servants since the master of the House took care of me. That’s why I asked her to open the windows and door. I should be the one who gets lectured.”

Not just Shia, even Elise looked surprised.

Silence.

But the expression of the woman glaring at Bastian softened.

“Shia, you can go now.”

“Y-Yes Madame! Pardon me.”

After a deep bow, she left the room swiftly and quietly closed the door.

Only Bastian, Elise and Madame were left in the room.

The Madame picked up her skirt and bent her knees in a curtsy.

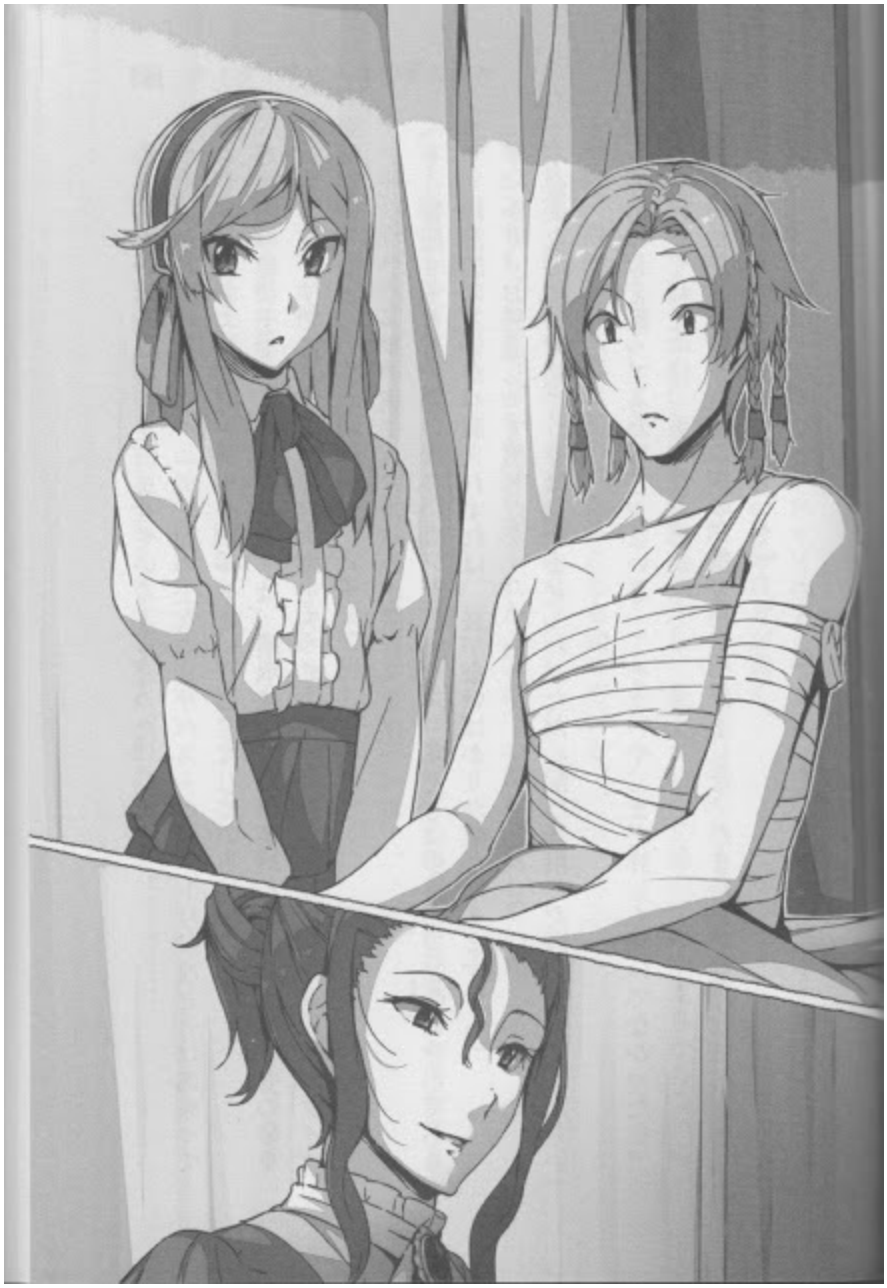
“How do you do. I am the wife of the head of the Tiraso Laverde House, my name is Marballa. Unfortunately, the House head is away on a trip, so I apologize for greeting you on his behalf.”

“Ah, eh, I am Heinrich… no, I am Bastian de Madeleine.”

The name of the Third Prince of Belgaria was Heinrich Trois Bastian de Belgaria.

But it would be too inconspicuous to use that name. With the High Britannia Kingdom and Belgaria Empire officially at war, the Imperial Prince would definitely be turned over to the army. Even though the host was a noble, it was still dangerous.

Elise stood up from her chair in greeting.



Seemed like she had already met their host.

And of course, she did not use the title of High Britannia Princess Elizabeth Victoria, but the student Elise Archibald.

The new Queen Margaret was after the life of her competitor, Elise. Even though Elise had lost her succession rights, Margaret wasn't someone who could be judged by common sense, so they must not be careless.

Marballa, the wife of the head of House Tiraso Laverde, smiled wryly.

“Don’t need to be so stiff, I won’t do anything bad. As we are merchants, we will only make unnecessary enemies if we interfere with politics.”

“It feels like you have seen right through us.”

“I have no intention of finding out things I don’t need to know. I just want to let you know that your worries are unnecessary.”

“I am not suspecting the people from your House. I have yet to ask, but you are the one who saved me right?”

“Yes, I was on the way back from a business negotiation when I saw the two of you. A doctor happened to be with me, so I asked him to attend to you immediately.”

Bastian nodded. Even though he was lying in bed, he still bowed deeply.

“Thank you for rescuing me.”

Bastian was surprised at himself for stating his thought so frankly.

The him in the past was arrogant and self centered, and took the things others did for him for granted. He wasn’t aware of that then, but since Bastian was a prince, the people around him didn’t dare to chastise his actions.

But now, he knew he was helpless by himself.

And his physical condition did not allow him to be of any help.

No matter what, he was very grateful that they protected Elise.

Marballa narrowed her eyes.

“I am just doing what I should be doing. Instead of that, I apologize for preparing this sort of room for you.”

“You are too kind, this is no trouble at all. You even prepared food for me.”

The chicken stew Shia brought in was still steaming.

“Ahh, you are in the middle of your meal. Please eat it before it gets cold. The doctor also said that eating more will help you to recover.”

“I will do that then.”

Bastian sent a spoonful of stew into his mouth.

It was salty.

The taste was monotonous compared to Belgarian dishes, but it was just nice for his tired body.

After bowing to Marballa, Elise also started drinking her soup.

“It’s delicious.”

“That’s great.”

Eating too fast would be detrimental to his body. Bastian experienced being lost in the wilderness before, so he understood that he should eat slowly when his stomach was empty.

He stopped momentarily.

“Aren’t there any people who came to search for us?”

“This house is in Smile Hills, which is rather far from Gray Bridge. Even if they tried to search for it, it would take some time to reach here.”

“I see.”

Marballa turned her gaze to Elise.

“I have sent men to search for the ring, but we didn’t find any at the place you two collapsed. It is probably lost in the river.”

Elise lowered her head.

“I understand, thank you. It’s all because I let it go.”

“I let them continue their search. They might be a bit odd, but they are unexpectedly reliable. Please don’t lose heart.”

“Yes.”

That might be so, but it wasn't that easy to find a ring that fell into the river.

The wound in Bastian's chest throbbed, as if it was reacting to his thoughts.

Marballa wanted to cheer them up, so she prepared expensive tea and apple pie in the afternoon and started chatting idly.

Something bothered Bastian.

"Hey, is it fine for a Belgarian like me to stay here?"

"Why not?"

"You see, High Britannia and Belgaria are at war now. Wouldn't a Belgarian being here bring you trouble?"

Even though the race of both nations were the same with no discernible difference in appearance, it was still possible to judge from their accent.

Marballa said with a smile.

"The main house of Tiraso Laverde is a Dukeship in the Belgaria Empire. The mother of the House's head is from the Empire, and we are just merchants with commerce in both nations."

"Now that you mention it, I did hear something like that."

According to Shia—— Tiraso Laverde was originally from a small country in the south. Fearing that their wealth would be confiscated in the event of a war, they set up a branch family in High Britannia about 50 years ago.

Or rather, what was wrong with this clan?

"This might sound too optimistic, but we have been doing business on this land for a long time. Now, no one would bring up the issue of us being nobles of a neighbouring country."

"That's wonderful."

"But as for worries, it would be the eldest child from the main family

who is staying here."

"The child from the main family, so he is a Belgarian?"

"Yes. His name is Roland, and is studying here in order to learn politics. He is a brilliant child, but his passion is unique. Or rather, he is too stubborn for such a young man."

*He must be eccentric,* Bastian thought. Judging from her uneasy expression, Elise was probably thinking the same thing.

"He objects to Bastian staying here?"

"When we spoke three days ago, he wasn't too concerned. But with the declaration of war, he wasn't too keen. I already told him that it would be fine with the House head here, but if he gives you any trouble, I will apologize to you in advance."

"I wouldn't mind anything he says. Elise, have you met him yet?"

Bastian was asleep for three days. He asked about the days he was unconscious, but Elise just shook her head.

"I was assigned to my own quarters, but I spent all my time here."

"I see."

"I am thinking about using this chance to introduce you two tonight. What do you think?"

Elise nodded in response to Marballa's suggestion.

"I think it would be good to greet him. I will be in your care."

"Please have a good rest before dinner then."

After bidding her farewell, she walked to the door.

Although she gave a stern impression at the start, her actions were unexpectedly gentle.

Bastian stopped her.

"Can I ask one last thing?"

“If I am able to answer.”

“When you chided Shia for leaving the door open, were you testing us?”

“It is my duty to train the maids.”

Marballa left a meaningful smile, and left the room.

Bastian shrugged.

“What a deep person.”

“But I think she is a nice person.”

“She does seem trustworthy. If she is from Margaret's faction, she would have sent us to the army.”

“That’s true.”

*However*—— Bastian thought.

With the progression of war, I have to find cards to negotiate with. I must not be careless. In order to protect Elise, I have to be more capable——

The girl blushed because of Bastian’s gaze.

“W-What’s the matter, Bastian?”

“Ah, I’m just thinking about what kind of fella that Roland is. Feels troublesome.”

“That’s right. It would be great if they let us stay here until Bastian’s wounds recover.”

“Wounds? Ahh, that is already ——!? That hurts!”

Bastian wanted to swing his arms, but his abdomen and back were groaning.

Elise had a dumbfounded expression.

“You really are an idiot. Even the beasts in the hills are concerned about their own lives. Just be a good boy and sleep. I will be

troubled if you don't recover soon."

"Yes."

He couldn't refute her.

"I really hope you will get well."

Elise said softly and gripped the corner of the bed sheet.

* * *

"This world is gradually rotting!"

The table was smacked with a bang! All the students gazed that way.

*Oh, it's just the usual* —— They then turned back and chatted among themselves.

Unbothered by their reaction, Jean Roland de Tiraso Laverde continued his speech.

He had a head of short blonde hair and wore round glasses.

"Letting the minority ruling class monopolize the wealth must not be tolerated!"

The classmate he was debating against was a man who waxed his hair stiffly, and wore his clothes all prim and proper.

"Not so!" He shook his head and replied.

"You can't say that. Because of the contribution made by the aristocrats, it is only right thing for them to receive wealth that corresponds with it. Or do you think the incapable and irresponsible peasants should get the same remuneration?"

"They should be judged by the same standard! There are too many people with undeserved wealth among the nobles."

"That's just theoretical talk. You want to judge nobles and peasants by the same standards? You possess the scale of the gods?"

“I might not have one, but such scales exist in this world.”

“Oh?”

“We just need to abolish the privileges of the nobles. Allow the commoners to trade freely. Revoke their right to impose taxes, and change the lease of land into a contract that both parties can agree to. And cancel their tax exemptions. If we take away their privileges and they can still show their worth, it would be acceptable for them to claim their lavish wealth. If that really happens, then we can see who are the people that are really necessary!”

“Foolish! You want the country to not grant special privileges to the nobles?”

“That’s a nation of equality.”

“Then who will defend the nation? When the enemy attacks, aren’t the nobles the ones who resist courageously? The nobles are special, so they should receive special treatment. You might not know, but I came from a lineage of knights, so I understand honour and valor.”

"The military should be a professional organization. If defending the nation is honourable, then why should the commoners, the ones conscripted for cheap, take to the field with the nobles?"

“That’s because the nobles have to take command. Without a commander, no matter how large a force is, it will still lose.”

“Someone without professional training is appointed as a commander just because he is a noble. And they are fighting battles that have not changed for the past 300 years. That means there must be commoners who can be excellent commanders too.”

“Fufu, how can those illiterate people take on the role of a commander?”

“In that case, the nation should not allow the nobles to splurge the country’s resources, and should spend them instead to educate the commoners!”

As their argument became heated, their shoulders bumped into each other.

“What’s happening?”

When they heard that, they turned their head and looked——

And found the professor who was about fifty years of age staring at them.

“If you don’t want to listen to my lecture, please leave.”

The other students were properly seated.

Roland rushed frantically to his seat.

The professor walked to his lectern.

It was time for class.

The professor flipped his book open on the lectern.

“Today, we will talk about Piercy's 'Discourse Techniques’. Well —— the most important point is to state clearly what exactly is the argument that you want to make, and set the topic.”

The students listened to the professor as he explained the contents in the textbook.

The professor would sometimes elaborate on the textbooks’ inadequate explanations, and the students would raise their queries.

Lessons in this era were done in the form of lectures, with ‘discussions’ between the students over various topics being the mainstay.

As the lessons required many books, which weren’t cheap at all, the students didn’t buy all the books.

Papers and stationery only became common recently, so they weren’t familiar with using them in lessons.

Memorising the necessary things was their first step in learning.

And the students would be given some thesis as homework, their

bags will usually contain the original thesis and books related to it.

Roland concentrated on the professor's lecture.

He was more passionate about learning than his classmates.

The lesson ended before noon. Like usual, Roland had lunch in the canteen. He might be an eccentric Belgarian, but he was passionate about his studies and a proponent of liberalism, so everyone acknowledged him.

He kept thinking about the lesson during lunch, noting the novel explanations, the elaboration he didn't quite understand, and reviewed the parts that he suspected the professor might have gotten wrong.

After eating his lunch, he went to the library to work on his thesis.

He returned to the classroom for the afternoon's lesson.

The atmosphere was different than usual.

All of his classmates were looking at him —— But they all averted their eyes without saying anything.

"What happened?"

He walked between his classmates and returned to his seat.

A breaking news report was placed on his desk.

Declaration of war against the Belgaria Empire!

Steelart year 42, April 23rd.

In the name of the new Queen Margaret Steelart.

We declared war against the Belgaria Empire.

On the same day, the 'Queen's Navy' commanded by Admiral Oxford set off.

The 74 gun Princess Class high speed warships launched a preemptive attack, and took the Empire's Chaineboule harbour!

We have news of the Kingdom's first division making landfall.

They are garrisoned in Chaineboule city because they encountered the Imperial Second Army.

A fierce battle is expected.

Roland stood stiffly as he stared at the papers.

"So it is finally starting."

"Don't mind it."

One of his friends rested a hand on his shoulder. Roland's other friends who ate lunch with him spoke too.

"The country's issue isn't any of our concerns, we are still us, this is the freedom of an individual."

"We should act rationally, especially in a situation like this."

"Is your family okay?"

Of course, there were people who showed obvious disgust.

"Hey, the Belgaria Empire is the enemy now right!? Which means, giving that guy an opportunity to learn is the same as working for the enemy!"

In response to the extremist opinion, Roland picked up his bag.

"Thank you. I respect High Britannia and its citizens. I have no intention of becoming an enemy. But there are people with family and friends fighting in the war, so it is natural for them to get emotional. I am also worried about my relatives taking care of me here, so I will head back for today."

He was just about to leave the classroom when his opponent for the debate that occurred before lunch break blocked his way.

It was the man who styled his hair stiff with wax.

He held opinions that were the complete opposite of Roland's, and the two of them debated intensely in the past.

He glared at Roland.

“You.”

“What?”

“On my honour as a noble of the High Britannia Kingdom, I will defend your rights to attend school.”

That was unexpected.

Roland was speechless momentarily.

“I thought you hated me.”

“Ahh, I do feel helpless about your shallow and flawed views. But our learning only starts after we acknowledge values that differ from our own.”

“It’s rare for our opinion to coincide.”

“This is just common sense.”

“I understand. I can’t promise that I will be back tomorrow, but I will come back to school after confirming my relative’s safety. That’s all I can say for now.”

His opponent nodded and moved aside.

Roland looked one round across the classroom —— and left.

The commotion in school was the same as usual, but the uproar on the streets was more prominent.

Some people turned green after hearing about the war.

Others started drinking in broad daylight and sang army songs.

Those frowning and whispering by the roadside probably opposed the war. And then, there were Belgarians.

There were many Belgerians studying or doing business in High Britannia.

Roland was one of them.

He saw people fighting.

Someone called for the constables, but he could feel public order deteriorating.

As he walked along the streets, he realized that he was clenching the newspaper tightly.

“I’ve had enough of this.”

Roland wanted to stay calm, but he still noticed that he was shook up quite badly.

He opened the crumbled newspaper soaked in sweat.

Aside from the war declaration, it also had other latest news.

Fugitive——

Belgarian spies disrupting the public order of the Kingdom.

A youth with brown hair and red eyes, claiming to be the third son of a Belgarian Earl House. And a petite young woman with blonde hair claiming to be a High Britannia student. The report included their detailed description, and even included a sketch.

“The report is so detailed, they will be caught in no time.”

The war declaration was yesterday, the 23rd, but this newspaper was distributed this morning.

Which meant that the wanted report of the spies was just published.

“Around sixteen years of age? Isn’t that the same as me? Would Belgaria send such spies?”

In Belgaria, if you’re fifteen years old, you’d be considered an adult.

However, that was considered old fashioned, most of the neighbouring nations considered eighteen years old as adults. It was seventeen for High Britannia.

Roland was already used to the culture here, so sixteen years old were still kids in schools for him.

“I can feel that the world is progressing in a bad direction.”

He walked towards the home that took care of him in this country with a gloomy feeling.

It was the house of the Tiraso Laverde branch family.

Their business involves selling the Belgarian imported cotton products. Cotton products were used in bedroom accessories, clothes, decorations and many other daily necessities.

The Empire’s product had better quality than High Britannia, and was highly valued.

But after war broke out in Belgaria, it was hard to tell how that would affect business. They couldn’t import directly, and there would be criticism since the main family were nobles in the Empire.

Times would become tougher, he thought.

* * *

Evening——

Bastian who was sleeping alone woke up because of the knocking on the door.

The door opened quietly, and a girl entered.

It was Elise.

“……”

“Hmm? Is it time for dinner already?”

“So you are awake. How are you feeling?”

“It’s a bit hot. Well, I was attacked, stabbed and fell into the river, so my body heating up could mean that my body is recovering.”

“Does it hurt?”

“My head is ringing, and the ground seems to be shaking.”

“Maybe I should greet them alone.”

“Why?”

“Because you are in bad shape.”

“Didn’t I tell you that my body heating up is a sign of recovery? I’m not setting off on a far journey on horseback. It will be fine.”

“That’s not fine for normal people.”

“Kukuku, when did you have the impression of me being a normal guy?”

When she heard him saying such pretentious things, Elise had an impatient face.

“This again? There are no such things as Dark Energy or Knights of Light.”

“Not so! This is a new meta! ‘After wandering on the verge of death, memories from my previous life were awakened. That’s right, I am the reincarnation of the hero who fought the Demon King!’ How’s that!?”

“Where did the power of that hero came from?”

“Eh? Ah, that is his previous life.”

“So the one who worked hard is the previous life, and the current life inherited the extraordinary powers without needing to do anything. I don’t like such shameless main characters.”

“I-Is that so?”

“I will only support people who may be normal, but work hard on their own.”

“Phew—— that’s true, it will be hot blooded if I add in a training phase.”

Bastian kept rambling on as he got down from his bed.

His body felt heavy.

Did his body feel dull because he slept for three days, or because his body was heating up?

Elise handed over the thing in her hands.

“Here are some clothes.”

“Oh, that’s a big help.”

His clothes were tattered from bullet holes and sword wounds, and were full of blood.

The clothes that were prepared for him was the kind usually worn by the High Britannia nobles.

He took off his clothes and Elise turned around immediately.

“P-Please don’t take off your clothes so suddenly!”

“Hmm? Why?”

“Don’t you have any shame?”

“My body isn’t something to be ashamed of even if I am seen right? Latreille and Eddie are the same too.”

“I will feel embarrassed!”

“Haha, you changed.”

“M-Me!?”

“High Britannia’s clothings are plain. Although it is comfortable.”

“Belgarian clothes have too much frills. There are a lot of decorations that hold unknown meanings.”

“It’s fine if it is sturdy enough. Let’s go eat dinner!”

* * *

Bastian headed to the dining hall together with Elise.

The rooms in the High Britannia Kingdom are plainer compared to

the Belgaria Empire.

But they did not prioritize efficiency above all else like the Germanian Federation. The white walls were decorated with paintings, vases were placed on the shelves, and the windows covered by velvet curtains.

The table had minimal decorations, with no gold or silverware at all.

However, the lighting uses gas lamp.

In the Belgaria Empire, there was only one gas lamp in the Palace.

Maybe Tiraso Laverde House was special.

The dishes had been laid out on the table.

Marballa was seated at one end of the table.

“Good evening. How are you feeling?”

“Much better than when I fell into the river.”

“Is that so.”

Elise was ushered by the maid to her seat, then Bastian sat beside her.

Ladies were first in all matters, this concept probably stemmed from religious views. Even Bastian who was uninterested during lessons in the palace knew such etiquettes.

“Sorry for the wait.”

“Not at all, I think Roland will be here soon.”

As they were speaking, a young man came into the dining hall.

Wearing High Britannia clothes similar to the one Bastian was wearing, he had a meticulous image. His blonde hair was trimmed really short, and he wore round glasses.

Their eyes met.

And he stopped.

“Ehh?”

Roland shifted his gaze between the two of them.

“W-What is it?”

He turned immediately and walked briskly out of the dining hall. Not just Bastian, even Marballa was dumbfounded.

They were wondering what’s wrong when he came back in the span of a single breath.

He held the newspaper in his hand.

“T-This!”

“I already knew about the war declaration.”

Bastian shrugged.

Marballa was calm, but she still said quietly.

“Calm down, Mr Roland. There are guests here.”

With a smack, Roland threw the papers onto the table.

“These people are fugitives!”

“So what?”

Marballa’s words surprised Bastian much more. Elise stood up from her chair with her eyes wide open.

Roland slammed onto the table with a bang.

“Isn’t that dangerous, Ms Marballa!? They will hang the entire House if we harbour spies!”

“Our guests have their own circumstances. I won’t do something as shameful as selling them out.”

“Even if you don’t, the servants would!”

“Mr Roland, do you mean to say there are servants in this mansion that want me dead?”

“Erm, no, I misspoke.”

“I read that report too. But take a look at our guests, do they look like Belgarian spies?”

“……”

Roland turned his gaze towards Bastian and Elise.

What sort of expression should they be making?

Elise looked back with a tense and serious face.

Bastian had a crooked smile, and was relaxed.

“No need for that. Harbouring spies is punishable by death? I don’t want to trouble my benefactor. I will leave then.”

He stood up after saying that.

“What are you saying, Bastian!?”

He understood that Elise was concerned about his wounds.

“For rescuing me after I fell into the river, and taking care of me as I lingered on the verge of death, you have my infinite thanks.”

“Bastian.”

“Fu.”

“You should say endless gratitude, how can it be infinite?”

“I-I coined this term myself! Doesn’t it sound radical!? Don’t you understand this kind of feeling!?”

Elise sighed.

“That is really something only you will do. Indeed, we can’t trouble our benefactors.”

When she said that, Marballa shook her head.

“According to the doctor, the wounds would take about a month to heal. Where do you plan to go when you can’t even walk properly?

Or do you happen to have somewhere you can go to?”

“Not really.”

Marballa sat up straight and said determinedly.

“If you are arrested or collapsed on the side of the road, it would be a slight against the honour of this House if word gets out. You want me to bear this shame?”

“I-I didn’t mean that.”

“If you wish to leave no matter what, I won’t stop you. But from the perspective of outsiders, it would seem like I chased you all out.”

“I see.”

Bastian was surprised that she would stop him so intensely.

Roland nodded with a troubled expression.

“Harbouring fugitives is dangerous, but like Ms Marballa said, there is the problem of the House’s reputation too. This is not something that could be given up on so easily for a merchant. I can’t deny that, but if we are found out…”

“If you are hesitant, then don’t be hasty with your decision. Since they made it to the newspaper, it meant the authorities have no idea about their location. Let’s not act rashly and have dinner first.”

“Yes, we should eat properly during meal times.”

Elise’s words pulled Bastian back to his seat.

After he was urged to, Roland sat as well.

Marballa said grace before dinner, and the others followed.

They then dug in.

As they were not of age yet, all the cups were filled with juice.

Baked beans, grilled fish, fried potato, boiled mushrooms and roast steak.

High Britannia dishes were served in individual large plates for each person. They were not served one at a time like appetizers, main dish and desserts.

It had a thick and salty fragrance, seemed like the soup used extravagant eggs and butter.

Unlike Belgaria, they didn't put as much effort into presentation, but it made full use of the ingredients' flavour. The steak was especially delicious.

The delicately prepared red meat was placed on the plates. The smell of roast beef was mixed with the fragrance of raw fresh.

When placed inside the mouth, it had a smooth texture that was on the verge of melting.

Even though Bastian's head would throb with pain when he chews his food, the delicious meat dulled the pain.

Because he ate something that he would dream about, Bastian asked for seconds.

"Ohh, this is delicious!"

"Don't eat too much and upset your stomach."

"Got it."

Marballa said happily with a smile:

"From the look of things, you will recover in no time."

"Yeah! All thanks to this delicious food!"

Is that so —— Marballa made a gesture, and the butler standing by the wall brought over something covered in white cloth.

And proffered it to Bastian.

"What is this?"

"I would like you to have this."

"Hmm?"

After removing the white cloth, a blue covered book was unveiled. There wasn't anything written on it.

Flipping it open, the inside was blank.

It was cream coloured paper, and was bundled into a book.

"Ohhh! This is!"

"I heard Shia mention that you are writing a book?"

"Ahh, that's right. I am the man who will write a masterpiece in the future!"

During spring two years ago ——

Bastian met a soldier named Regis, who taught him how to write stories.

He then said:

"If you write a masterpiece in the future, I might just read it."

After that, Bastian strangely believed that he will definitely write a masterpiece, and he did so whenever he had time.

Elise said worryingly.

"This might sound rude, but aren't books expensive? I would feel bad if you go so far for us."

"It's fine, this is just a sample the head of the House bought for a business. He has no need for this thing."

Bastian nodded.

"In that case, it must be fate that this book ends in my hands. It must have been created for the sake of letting me write my masterpiece."

"I am really impressed by your confidence."

"Don't compliment me so much, I will feel embarrassed.

Bastian said with a silly laugh while Elise sighed.

Roland turned head.

“Masterpiece? Are you writing a thesis of sorts? They are usually written on manuscript paper.”

The manuscript papers of this era had printed horizontal lines. Even so, it was high grade items.

“No, I am writing a story!”

Even though Elise mumbled ‘Stories are also written on manuscript paper’, Bastian didn’t hear her at all.

Because Roland gave the impression of a model hardworking student, Bastian was sure that Roland would think this is silly. But Roland seemed to be thinking about something.

The young man pondered for quite a while, and then said:

“Can you elaborate further on your story?”

“It’s a hot blooded and thrilling adventure story!”

“Oh, that kind. So it’s that sort of tale, right?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t you know? The younger sister of the exiled prince appearing before him as a knight, and helping her brother take back the throne.”

“Ahh, of course I know! Ah, well~ it’s a bit hard for me to write such a brilliant main character.”

“Don’t you think the sister is great!?”

“Yeah, that sister is awesome. I also have a sister, but she is different somehow. Can’t I just make a cow the heroine?”

“You don’t understand, the mandatory criteria of a heroine is love.”

“Love huh.”

Elise had a surprised expression while Marballa tilted her head when they saw their passionate interaction.

When people discuss topics they were interested in, the people who were not interested in the topic would look at them in such a way.

Roland faked a cough.

“Cough cough! You are Bastian right? Come to my room later, I have something important to discuss.”

“Hmm? Fine, I already slept plenty anyway.”

Things developed in such a way.

* * *

After Bastian finished dinner, he visited Roland’s study room.

Even though he was studious, he was also a huge fan of adventure novels.

Roland said with a serious expression.

“To be honest, I was troubled before studying abroad, thinking that I won’t be able to read the sequels of this series. Belgaria’s entertainment novels can’t be bought in High Britannia. You won’t look down on me because of that right?”

“Of course not, I feel the same too. Well, I was surprised when I arrived here.”

“Yeah. To think there are entertainment novels sold on the other side of the ocean too!”

“That’s right. It would be delayed a month or so, but I will buy when the stocks are here.”

“Even though the price is three times higher in High Britannian, I will still buy. Do you know the illustrations here are larger?”

“Are you for real!?”

“I learned the meaning of justice through these stories.”

“I understand. As expected, the main character has to be on the side

of justice.”

“Have you read Mr ‘Andrell's 'Green Knight'?”

“Of course, what else would I read if not that?”

“What’s the most famous scene?”

“Fu, ‘Damn it Count! I will never let you take Antoine!’ Then he drew out his sword with a shing! The evil Count who stole his lover was invincible in his swordsmanship. But the scene where the main character challenged him despite that is the very definition of courage.”

“Yes, justice that will never bow down to violence!”

Roland nodded deeply.

He reached out his right hand.

And Bastian grabbed that hand.

The two of them gripped their hands firmly.

After that, they chatted about stories.

The topic shifted to the type of stories Roland likes.

“Hey, so you like stories where the weak defeat the strong? And you prefer the ones with commoners as main characters?”

“That’s right. Entertainment novels are usually bought by nobles, so it’s rare to see main characters that are commoners.”

Aside from entertainment novels, the more prominent would be the ones that were banned in the Belgaria Empire.

“Roland, are you a Liberal?”

“I can’t deny that.”

Even though such ideals were not banned in Belgaria, but it would be easy to lose your job if you made such speeches in public.

“Are you for real? Even though you are a noble?”

“You misunderstand Liberalism. Its goal isn’t for the commoners to overthrow the aristocrats.”

“But its ideal is for the Emperor to be the same as commoners right?”

“That’s not true. I just think that everyone should have the right to pursue happiness.”

“Ehh? Isn’t that a given?”

“I thought so too, but what about reality? This is just a part of liberalism, but the part I am more concerned about is —— commoners are fated to be oppressed, and couldn’t change that fact no matter how hard they work. That’s Belgaria’s system of governance right now.”

“They could earn the prestige of Chevalier if they achieve merits on the battlefield.”

“What about those who prefer business or farm work?”

“Is this an issue of taxes?”

“I'm just saying that everyone has freedom to choose their own path.”

“It’s hard for me to understand your views.”

“… That might be so from the perspective of a noble… I also know that I am a deviant and a hypocrite. After all, we dine and dress lavishly and live in vast lodgings, and all of this comes from oppressing the commoners.”

Bastian scratched his head.

Since the lives of nobles were built on the foundation of oppressing the people, then Bastian’s life was set on the foundation of oppressing these nobles.

Royals, not only do they collect taxes from the citizens in their jurisdiction, they also tax the nobles.

“Because long ago… Humans feared the night so they gathered

together and started a community that lived and hunted together, which meant that a leader is necessary. Society evolves naturally so that the strong will get the lion's share of the benefits."

"But now, we already posses a safe haven, can harvest food from farms at fixed intervals, and don't need to rely on others that much in order to survive. So on what basis are the royals and nobles living such a privileged life? Because their ancestors hunted more food during the stone age?"

"Hmm…"

My ancestors are the founders of the Belgaria Empire —— He couldn't say that.

He had to hide his identity as a Prince.

And even if his ancestors founded the Empire, so what?

He remembered Elise's words suddenly.

'So the one who worked hard is the previous life, and the current life inherited the extraordinary powers without having the need to do anything. I don't like such shameless main characters.'

I see, Bastian thought.

"... The royals and nobles got their status because one of their ancestor's hard work, and not by their own merit or anything to do with themselves. But they could enjoy wealth normal people couldn't afford from the day they were born."

"While the commoners live a life of hardships."

"You are right, this is wrong."

"Because this is how the country has been functioning long before we are born, all of these had become common sense… the nobles living a lavish lifestyle, while the commoners shoulder heavy taxes, everyone is used to such a system. But this system is wrong. Everyone should have equal rights to pursue their own happiness."

"... But it would be hard for the nation to survive without the Emperor

and nobles right? We would need national representatives and national defences."

"The citizens can elect the representatives of the nation. And professional soldiers that are not nobles should defend the nation. That's a governance system that would fit this era."

"Fit this era…"

"If you are interested, read this. It might be in High Britannian, but you should have no problem reading this right?"

"Ahh, it should be fine."

Because Bastian was studying abroad, he had no problem with daily conversation, but it would be harder to read political terms.

Roland noticed this and laughed.

"This is just a High Britannia entertainment work. Even though it is a mystery novel, the author is a pure Liberal and embedded his ideas into it perfectly. I am still learning and lack the knowledge, and I'm not very familiar with this. This book will be able to impart the ideals to you more perfectly than I can."

"I am actually not that keen on becoming a Liberal though."

Bastian was a royal.

He hated the political power struggle and escaped overseas, but he didn't plan on abandoning his royal identity.

Or plan to overthrow the royals.

He did realize that there were problems with the governance system of the Empire after hearing Roland's words.

But letting the citizens elect a national representatives and giving military command to a commoner was too impractical.

If national representatives who didn't even understand ceremonial etiquettes were to receive foreign diplomat, it would be hard to achieve diplomatic goals.

Even if military command was given to them, they would not be able to win.

Bastian did know there were talents among the commoners too.

In that case they could be bestowed with the title of Chevalier.

If the farmers couldn't get good yields, then they should just lower the taxes. It will also reward those who performed exemplary, they just need to perfect this system.

So in conclusion, if they improve the current system, it will improve the quality of life of the people.

"... I heard that liberalism is like setting a fire in the house because you don't like it."

"You are unexpectedly witty."

"Haha, this isn't much."

That night, Elise came knocking on the door and lectured him: "How late is an injured person going to stay up!?"

High Britannia kept defeating the Belgarian Army.

In the first land battle, they routed the Imperial Second Army.

And when the Empire conducted a large scale counter attack on 19th May in the battle of Lafressange —— The First Royal Division engaged the Imperial Seventh Army. Although the Imperials outnumbered the Royal Army by several folds, the Kingdom achieved a great historic victory over a larger force.

For the neighbouring nations watching the battles, the supremacy of the new rifles and cannons were obvious.

This was an event that shook the entire continent.

Up until now, Belgaria's cavalry and infantry held supremacy over the continent.

But the High Britannian forces which was inferior in both numbers and training actually defeated the Empire. This was enough to

destroy the power balance of all the nations.

Most countries thought that this would be the era of firearms from now on.

All of the nations in the continent had dispatched diplomats to the ‘Queen’s Tower’ in the capital. Foreign merchants and technicians also gathered in the capital in order to obtain this revolutionary technology.

This dramatic change was the result of High Britannia’s technology receiving very high evaluation.

It wasn’t strange to find something that was sold for a pound last month to be priced at two pounds.

In order to recruit engineers, their salary had doubled, some even tripled.

There were many unemployed people sleeping in the streets before the war, but recruitment advertisements were now overflowing.

With signs of prosperity everywhere, even though the city was at war, everyone felt that victory was all but guaranteed.

The cheers of men rang out in the streets.

“Three cheers for the Queen!! Hip Hip hooray!! Hip Hip hooray!!”

There were thunderous applauses and everyone drank happily.

As the war was going well, public order in the city improved.

During times like this, it might be dangerous for a person to announce that they were Belgarian, but it was still safe to purchase items.

However, Roland didn’t attend school.

Bastian was curious about Roland and asked during dinner one night.

"I heard the cities are peaceful, but are the schools dangerous? Don’t you want to study there?”

“Well, of course I want to go. If I can self study, I wouldn’t have come abroad. But do you think the Belgarian Empire will lose without a fight? I have to consider the possibility that bad news might be coming.”

“That’s true.”

Similarly, the head of House Tiraso Laverde wasn’t staying at home as there was a chance of the danger of death.

Only Bastian, Roland, Elise and Marballa were at the dining table.

Elise tilted her head.

“High Britannia’s new rifle have overwhelming power, what other unexpected news could there be?”

Roland frowned.

“Maybe I worry too much.”

“Wrong! The Belgarian Empire is not to be trifled with. How many centuries of war do you think it had experienced? Even without powerful weapons, they are still men. In the end, war is fought between men.”

“… Ugh. But isn’t the view that from now on, war will be decided by rifles and cannons since they are gaining popularity?”

“Guns don’t kill people, people kill people. That is war. No matter what era it is, there will always be people who over exaggerate the potency of weapons, but those who really understand war wouldn’t say such foolish things.”

“You know war?”

“Of course, I am a man of the Belgarian Empire.”

They might have different mothers, but the commander of the Imperial First Army was his brother Latreille. He also held full command of the Imperial forces.

It was impossible for Bastian who was already of age to not have battle experience.

His friend Eddie from House Balzac seemed to have returned to the capital, but he was fighting at the front lines not too long ago.

“… This country will not lose so easily.”

Bastian’s prediction was spot on.

June 6th, Morning——

Elise entered Bastian’s room.

She was wearing the clothes of a High Britannian noblewoman, and had tied her hair up.

It wasn’t nice to keep troubling the House, so she started working for Marballa recently. They looked like mother and daughter in that attire.

“Morning Bastian, how do you feel today?”

“Ahh, I’m getting better.”

He stretched his shoulders with a crack.

He had yet to make a full recovery, but was healing steadily.

“Are you still reading?”

“I borrowed some books from Roland. Good books really make for a great read.”

“That’s true. But books are expensive, so treat them with care.”

Elise picked up the books stacked beside his bed.

Ahh, Bastian became anxious.

“W-Wait, I will tidy those up!”

“Fufu… It’s fine. You are still injured, this is —— Hmm?”

Elise noticed something and opened the book in her hands. Her eyes went wide open.

Her smiling face was covered by a gloomy cloud.

She then turned bright red.

Her voice was trembling.

“... Bastian?”

“D-Don’t misunderstand, this is a hot blooded tale of a man’s adventurer alright? Although the illustrations are a bit intense.”

“... But this is a nude illustration!?”

“Erm, that… that is… the scene where he improves his friendship with the girl he rescued?”

“Nonsense!”

“This is love, love!”

“This is lust, not love! I want to inspect the rest of the books!”

“Waaiiittt! I object!”

Because Bastian tried to hide the books behind him, it looked like Elise was hugging him.

His back injuries had almost healed, so it would be easy for him to push her back. And with Bastian’s strength, Elise wouldn’t be able to move even a finger.

But when he realized it…

He didn’t know where he should touch.

Even if he held her shoulders, Elise’s hands could still reach around. But he couldn’t touch her chest or waist! And he might fracture her slender wrist if he grabbed them.

“Let me see that!”

“S-Stop this, Elise!”

“If it isn’t indecent, then let me see it!”

“No no, calm down!”

“You never did anything to me, so why are you looking at such things!?”

“Huh!?”

Elise who was straddling on top of Bastian suddenly stiffened.

After sucking in some air, she covered her mouth.

Her ears were red.

Tears welled up in her eyes.

They were close enough to feel each other’s breath, Bastian could feel his heart racing fast.

“E-Elise——”

Creak.

The door to the room opened. Along with knocking sounds, but that was just a formality.

Bastian and Elise turned their head to check swiftly.

It was Roland.

“Yo morning! The book I loaned you yesterday——”

He suddenly stood still.

And looked at Bastian and Elise quietly.

“... Erm… I loaned that book with the idea ‘there is nothing wrong with sexy heroines’... But it seems I was mistaken. I forgot you are not alone and free. Sorry.”

“Waaaiiitt! You are misunderstanding!”

“It’s my bad for getting in the way of lovers frolicking! But still, I must say that this sort of thing should be done at night!”

“It’s not that sort of thing!!”

Bang! Roland knocked hard on the wall.

“Ughh! God created beauty, but I am not allowed to touch such beauty. Oh God, curse you!!”

“Heyyy, Roland!?”

If priests from churches heard that, he would probably be lectured til morning. Roland ran out to the corridor screaming.

Elise’s face was red and she looked as if she was about to cry.

“… This is all Bastian’s fault!”

“My fault!?”

Elise then ran off as well.

Roland suddenly came back.

He looked different from just a moment ago, when he was yelling something strange.

He wore a serious expression and held a newspaper in his hand.

“High Britannia lost!”

According to the newspaper——

Four days ago, 2nd June.

After the naval battle of Épée Prière bay, the ‘Queen’s Navy’ which was held in higher regard than the army was obliterated.

According to reports from Belgaria, the enemy was the sea elements of the Imperial Fourth Army.

Our Princess 74 gun high speed steam warship was sunk. Several captains led by Admiral Oxford were taken as prisoners with many of the crew.

Chaineboule harbour was seized by the enemy.

Losing both the port and control of the sea meant the supply line was cut off, the High Britannia army inside Belgaria was on their own.

And the new Queen, Margaret, was still in the front lines with the army, so there was an urgent need of confirming future plans.

The parliament was preparing for peace negotiations tensely. If the Queen was captured, they might be forced to sign a long term treaty as ransom.

Or maybe this will become a battle of attrition between the two nations —— In the past, Belgaria had counterattacked in less than a year after their territory was taken. Last year too, Varden Grand Duchy invaded Beilschmidt, and in February, they lost Fort Volks to Belgaria.

The commander of the Beilschmidt Border Regiment was the Fourth Princess Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria. She was just 15 years old, but had the famous general Black Knight Jerome serving under her.

And this young princess was appointed commander of the Imperial Fourth Army, and very likely the sea battle too.

If this heroic lady from the Empire entered the fray, it would be very possible for High Britannia battlefront to fall.

Let us hope for the spirited counterattacks of our brave High Britannia soldiers!

—— The news ended with words encouraging the people to keep their fighting spirits up anyway.

Bastian held his head.

“Are you for real… That girl changed the tide of the war…”

“Is that your sister?”

“Yeah, that is my… Ehh… No, I don’t know her, yup.”

“I see.”

Elise had gotten off the bed and was standing beside it.

Bastian got up as well and sat on the bed.

Roland leaned against the wall with his arms crossed and he was deep in thought.

“I know someone deeply involved in the army, and heard from him…”

“Are you really our age?”

“How rude, I’m 16 too.”

“No, I mean the way you speak…”

“Ugh… T-This manner of speech is befitting of an intellectual, and is nothing to be ashamed of! Instead of that, I heard there is an excellent strategist alongside the princess.”

“Really?”

Both Belgaria and High Britannia put in a lot of effort in espionage.

If they were lucky, they could find out intelligence related to the enemy military.

“I heard he is Third Grade Admin Officer Regis d’Auric… You heard of him?

“I only joined the First Imperial Army for a time.”

“I see. This information might have some truth in it. I heard from my acquaintance… he is known as the ‘Magician’.”

“Hah!? Magician!?”

Bastian almost spat when he heard a term that only appears in entertainment novels.

Roland nodded.

“He took down Fort Volks with a small force, and defeated the overwhelmingly powerful ‘Queen’s Navy’ it’s only natural for such legends to circulate right?”

“Yeah——”

“I am a noble of the south after all, so it’s normal only normal for me not to know about him. Bastian, you grew up in the capital, does this

name sound familiar to you?”

“Regis d’Auric? In the capital, such a name…”

He suddenly turned stiff.

Bastian recalled the incident that occurred two years ago in spring.

The young soldier reading in the library was called Regis. And he did say his last name was Auric…?

Bastian shook his head.

“No, impossible. That guy was wearing a commoner’s grade uniform. And he was reading novels for entertainment, not for work. And from the way the instructor scolded him, it is impossible for him to be an amazing strategist.”

“Since he was unknown all this while, he should be a young strategist. By the way, do you know about the commotion in the city areas of High Britannia.”

“You saw something?”

“No, actually I only found out the news I told you moments ago. But it is easy to imagine. An army equipped with the latest model of rifles and cannons didn’t even get to fight Prince Latreille who will become the next Emperor, and was defeated by his 15 years old sister.”

“Well, the rowdy atmosphere of the people who considered victory a given is all gone.”

“With virtually no chance of victory, all they have left is their fear of the Belgaria Empire. After all, they did pick a fight with the strongest nation in the continent.”

Elise’s expression gloomed.

She and Bastian tried their best to stop this war from breaking out.

But they failed and war broke out. Right now, the country was heading down the path of defeat.”

“… Elise, don’t blame yourself too much.”

“I know Bastian… I am fine.”

Roland shrugged.

“We are the ones that should be worried. Not long ago, there were incidents of violence and murders against the Belgarians here. The criminals were caught, but the police interrogation was conducted haphazardly, and even when there were eyewitnesses, they will let the suspect go on the account of insufficient evidence.”

“What!?”

“The group called itself the ‘Loyal Soldiers’, but what they did are crimes. A band of robbers and killers. They are mainly young people who didn’t join the war. They claim that they are exacting vengeance for the High Britannians that were killed.”

“But that is no excuse for killing Belgarians residing in High Britannia! If they want to join the war so much, then they should just go and do it!”

“From the nation’s perspective, it is hard to stir up morale for war and restraint the citizens from violence at the same time. And for that group —— They didn’t need proper reasons to commit violence in the first place.”

Not just Bastian, even Elise tilted her head.

They didn’t understand.

“But why?”

“… This is the ugliness of humanity… The exhilaration from abusing others verbally and physically is entertaining for them.”

“T-That can’t be.”

“Of course, your conscience would bite at you if you abuse someone innocent. So people won’t do that, and everyone is kind. But if there are any reasons or excuses, it would be a different matter altogether. Armed with a legitimate reason, they can abuse others

verbally without any burden to their conscience, and will keep attacking until they are satisfied. That's the kind of people that commit acts of violence against the Belgarians. They must have their dreams too, but had given in to the realities of their increasingly despairing life. And now, they could only find value in their own lives under the flag of 'justice'.

Elise couldn't speak when she heard Roland's words.

Bastian lowered his head too.

"These fellows are just weak minded people."

"Yes. Because they lack the drive and courage, they couldn't overcome the obstacles that life threw at them. So they are jealous of those who succeed, and mock the weak… Like starving wild dogs, they keep searching for enemies who they could swing their hammer of 'justice' at. If I look down on them, then from their perspective, I am just one of them."

"That's true."

"After seeing the news of the side that lost the war, the 'Loyal Soldiers' will become worse. Beset by anxiety and suspicion, the fear of a Belgarian counterattack will gnaw at them. All they can do, is to act on their twisted patriotism."

"What should we do?"

"I will tell Marballa… that I want to return to Belgaria."

"Eh!?"

"I can't focus on my study now. In a nation where my life is in peril and where I can't even visit a library, there is no reason to stay. But in High Britannia, there are still my relatives, friends and ambition."

"… Ambition?"

"Ahh, actually… Erm… Let's talk about that next time. Let's start moving quickly for now. Fortunately, House Tiraso Laverde is located in the south, and isn't too involved in this war. The nobles and citizens here do not care about the war that much."

“Are there ships?”

“We are in the middle of a war. Civilian transport vessels are prohibited from going out to sea. However, there are still ships that could be used.”

“People smuggling!?”

“Not so loud, Bastian.”

“Oh…”

He covered his mouth in a panic.

The room was situated in a corner of the mansion, so it should be fine.

“Anyway, I am returning to Belgaria. How about it? Although the war is still ongoing, do you want to come with me?”

“Eh, we have to go too!?”

“If both of you stay here, and we assume that something is going to happen, it will only trouble Marballa.”

“T-That’s true.”

“... Please give us some time to think about this.”

Elise said quietly with a troubled expression.

Roland nodded.

“It’s fine for Bastian and me, but High Britannia is your home nation. It is natural for you to feel confused. Even though I am not wanted by the authorities, I don’t want to stay at Marballa’s place. It will take some time to prepare the ship, so think carefully about it in the meantime.”

“I understand…”

Like Roland said, the ‘Loyal Soldiers’ became more aggressive.

Covered in the gloom of defeat in war, public order in the city worsened. Not just Belgarians, there were victims among the High

Britannians too.

And, one week later ——

They will be leaving via the harbour tonight.

Elise still didn't answer if she would be leaving together with Bastian and Roland.

She found it hard to make a choice.

Even though they were wanted, Bastian couldn't just abandon her and return home. And he couldn't force her to go with him either.

The sun had set.

Bastian and Elise were called to Marballa's room.

It was the study room of the House head.

Rows of shelves were placed on one side of the wall, making it look like a library.

In the center was a large table and beside it was a leather chair. Marballa who was leaning on the chair seemed to have slimmed down.

She must have been under a lot of stress lately.

"Mr Bastian, how are you feeling?"

"My body is still a bit dull, but my wounds don't hurt anymore, thank you very much!"

"That's wonderful."

She placed a small wooden box onto the center of the table.

Elise looked at it.

"Have you made up your mind to go to Belgaria?"

"… I am still hesitant… There are things I need to do in this country, and many who are counting on me, supporting me with their very lives… But I failed… and lost everything. However, I still think I can

do something for this country.”

“So you think that you won’t be able to do anything if you go to Belgaria?”

“That’s right.”

“You… oppose this war?”

“Yes, I think our nation can only prosper in a peaceful atmosphere… Why are you asking this all of a sudden?”

“I’m sorry for being so abrupt. But this is an important question.”

“I see.”

“This is… probably the thing you had been searching for.”

She proffered the small wooden box.

Elise accepted the box and opened it.

And inhaled sharply.

Inside the box was a gold ring.

It was the symbol of the monarch of High Britannia, with the engraving of the Royal Family crest on it.

“T-This is…?”

“I was not sure who requested for this item, but it was a request for me. There are boats that pans for gold in Gray Bridge River. The gold panners job is to filter out gold from the river bed, that’s how they found this ring.”

“So that’s how… But wouldn’t they normally keep it for themselves?”

“Gold panners have their own guild too. I bought this from their Association Head.”

Elise rounded her eyes.

Bastian scratched his head.

“This is wonderful, Elise. Erm… Thank you, Marballa.”

“Thank you very much!”

She clasped her hands around the ring as if she was praying, and slowly knelt onto the floor.

Marballa made a detour around the large table and knelt before Elise.

“We are the ones that should be asking for your forgiveness because of our poor reception. Your Majesty must be the true Queen of High Britannia, Elizabeth Victoria.”

“... No… Even though the Queen Charlotte bestowed the ring to me, I didn’t make it back to the capital in time. So, the succession issue is… I also wish to beg your pardon for keeping this secret despite all that you have done for us, Marballa.”

“What are you saying, it is only natural to hide it under such circumstances.”

Elise stood up and held Marballa’s hand.

“I am very grateful.”

“I was only certain after seeing this ring. Compared to Queen Margaret who started the war, Your Majesty is more suited to be the Queen of High Britannia.”

“... I am ashamed to say this… But I am already…”

“Even the Tiraso Laverde House can help you in some ways. Our House head is an executive of the merchant guild.”

“Ah, is that so?”

“On the surface, we are dealing with cotton goods. However, we are also running the import of high quality iron ore and steel plates, which is one of the key businesses of our House. No matter the outcome of this war, if High Britannia wish to oppose the Empire, high quality steel is necessary.”

“Y-Yes.”

“With our capital and history, we still have some say in politics. I think we can be of use for Your Majesty.”

“... I’m not the queen. Now, I am just a student, Elise Archibald.”

“I understand. So, Lady Elise… In order to guide the country down the right path, please allow us to aid you in your journey.”

“I am happy to hear that. But, what do we need to do?”

“It’s a nice atmosphere,” Bastian interrupted.

“Your objective is clear. I am grateful to Marballa, but if it would spark a civil war, I will take Elise with me and run.”

“... I don’t want to become the excuse to start a war.”

Elise looked troubled.

Marballa said with a smile.

“We merchants wish for peace too, and would not do anything that might spark off a war. And that is why I hope Lady Elise will —— escape to Belgaria.”

“Eh!?”

“You might be surprised, but High Britannia is in turmoil right now. If a new Queen candidate shows up now, it would probably incite a civil war.”

“That would be awful.”

“If civil war breaks out in the middle of the war with Belgaria, this country would probably be finished. So we have to avoid Lady Elise showing herself to the public.”

“Yes.”

“You might not trust me if I tell you to leave everything here to me, but I still have to say it. Please leave everything here to me.”

Elise nodded, she seemed to have made up her mind.

“... I am just a powerless student now, and since Marballa has a

proposal that would benefit the nation, I want to contribute in some way too. Now, I can understand why we can't show the ring to the world yet."

Marballa smiled in relief.

Bastian pointed out his own doubts.

"Elise, are you really going to the Belgaria Empire?"

"This isn't a decision I can make so easily, Bastian. I have many friends and relatives here after all."

"Ah, that's right, you have a lot to consider after all… I thought you have thought it through."

"… To be honest… I am hesitant."

"I-I see."

Elise bit her lips.

And averted her eyes away from Bastian.

"… I am worried that my personal feelings might be causing an error in my judgement…"

"Eh?"

Her words were too vague, so Bastian couldn't understand and tilted his head.

Elise sighed.

After that——

After thanking their benefactor Marballa, they bid each other farewell.

At the same time, they thanked the maid Shia for taking care of them all this while.

Marballa showed a lonely expression.

"When peace does come, let's meet again."

After the sunset, the moon rose and stars twinkled, Bastian and company left the mansion.

In order to be safe, they didn't ride in normal carriages, and took cargo wagons to the harbour instead.

The moon rose high.

It was covered by clouds all of a sudden, blurring the silhouette of the moon even further.

"... I have a bad feeling about this."

When he heard what Roland said, Bastian asked:

"What is it?"

"I hate vague things."

"You mean the moon?"

"Yes. But other things as well."

"I have a bad feeling too… But the ship is setting off soon, right?"

"Yes it is. We can't go back now."

Night at the dock.

The sea breeze was weak, and the sound of the waves was soft. Compared to the beach, the smell of the tides was less pronounced.

In order to receive cargo coming from abroad, there were a series of warehouse built behind the harbour.

As there wasn't any moonlight, one might fall into the sea with a misstep.

And of course, there were no railings here.

"There's no ship here?"

"... It would be too prominent if it was parked here, the ship will be here at about 2am. It was a pain trying to find sailors who could dock in pitch darkness."

Bastian and Elise followed behind.

Only one of the warehouses was open.

There were many people there, about a hundred or so. Everyone carried heavy luggages, and waited quietly in the dark with bated breath.

After Bastian opened the door, they all looked his way.

Elise yelped softly, as that was how creepy the scene felt.

“It’s me everyone, don’t worry.”

The hundred odd people relaxed.

Bastian asked quietly.

“… They are?”

“They are Belgarians who want to go back just like us. The hundred odd people here and the luggage beside the warehouse will set off before dawn. The ship should be here soon…”

“By the way, you don’t have much luggage, Roland.”

“I am just bringing the minimum amount and some food.”

There was also a book in his hand.

Nothing was written on the cover.

“What book is that?”

“You won’t laugh?”

It was rare seeing Roland acting embarrassed.

“No, but I will laugh if it is something funny.”

“How rude, Bastian.”

“Well, I am hoping to hear your honest feedback in the future anyway —— This is a book I am writing.”

“Are you for real!? You are writing an adventure story too!?”

“Ah, no… I am writing down my ideas after organizing them. It is not an entertainment work. Normally, this would be written on manuscript papers and sent to the publishing factory. There are publishers who would go out of their way to purchase manuscripts in order to publish books.”

“You are writing it yourself?”

“After seeing you write your novel… I was thinking that organizing my thoughts and writing them down is a good idea.”

“It looks great! You even took the effort to bind manuscripts papers together!”

“… I won’t deny that.”

Roland was a little embarrassed.

Bastian laughed.

Elise laughed too.

At this moment.

The noise of several carriages rolling could be heard.

Bastian was the first one to notice.

“What is that!?”

He looked out from the entrance of the warehouse.

Roland walked there too.

“What happened?”

“Lots of carriages are coming, three, four…”

“What!? Is it the police!? The army!?”

“… How messy. These people don’t look like the disciplined army, and is more like a gathering of delinquents.”

Roland trembled and said:

“That is the worst… Bastian… These people are the ‘Loyal Soldiers’.”

Panic broke out in the warehouse.

Everyone knew about the organization that seeked out Belgarians to murder. That’s why they were escaping to the Empire.

Most of the people here were civilians without weapons. Although there were people with swords and rifles, it was hard to tell if they could put up meaningful resistance.

Bastian looked at the dagger in his clothes.

It was something he borrowed from the Empire’s treasury vault.

Roland uttered in a low voice.

“… As expected… The ones here… are them after all.”

“They are coming straight for us. Did our plan get leaked?”

“Damn it…”

“Well, it’s the trafficking of over a hundred people, it can’t be helped if the news leaked somewhere along the way.”

“Looks like I have no hope of becoming a strategist… I can’t devise a perfect battle plan.”

“Hey, what are you trying to do!?”

“There’s no other way… I’m the one who planned the trafficking. I have to take responsibility and buy time, you guys, escape by the back door.”

Roland ran out of the warehouse.

Bastian and Elise relayed the situation to the people inside the warehouse and chased after him.

The carriages stopped before the warehouse, and roughly 30 men alighted.

All of them looked like famished jackals.

They stunk of beer and held swords and rifles.

They didn't wear armour and were dressed like civilians with blue duvet jackets. All of them wore this blue jacket, which was like a uniform to them.

Standing at their head is a short bald man in his mid twenties.

But he was really cocky.

"Heyy! Gathering in this warehouse so late at night, are you planning to run somewhere, you Belgarian scum!"

Roland stood before the warehouse as if he was protecting it.

"... 'Loyal Soldiers' huh? We are going back to Belgaria. We won't cause you any trouble if we leave High Britannia, right?"

"Hah, are you sleepwalking, you trash? We are at war… I will kill you!"

"Wait, the people here are civilians, and they have not violated any laws of High Britannia."

"Even if they are Belgarian civilians, I will still kill them!"

"Damn it… I-I understand… Then I will let you do as you wish as their representative. Please let the others go!"

"Hahaha! That's great. This guy says he wants to be our slave, hahaha!"

The thirty odd men laughed.

Sarcastic laughter broke out.

"No way!" Get the women here!" Strip and jump into the sea, glasses!"

The skinhead in front drew his sword.

"Then I will cut you to pieces as you wish. Starting with you."

"... Do you people have any humanity at all?"

“My friend died after joining the war. That’s reason enough to cut you down.”

“That’s just quibbling! That in no way justifies your criminal actions. Your friend’s death is nothing more than an excuse to satiate your thirst for violence! Don’t you feel any shame towards your friend!?”

The truth seldom sounded pleasant.

Roland’s words were correct, but it angered these people.

The skinhead’s eyes became bloodshot, and he slashed with his sword.

“I will eviscerate you, Galian!”

The sword cleaved down.

Roland gritted his teeth.

“Ughhh…”

“Hey, you think you can win if you run out here alone? You will just be cut down after trying to dodge. It will hurt if you get cut you know?”

A hand reached out from behind. It was Bastian who caught the blade of the skinhead.

The skinhead’s eyes widen from surprise.

He had never seen anyone stop a blade by catching it.

“W-What… Why you!”

“Don’t you have easier names?”

“Damn it! W-Why can’t I move… the sword!?”

The skinhead tried tugging and pushing it, but the blade caught by Bastian didn’t even move an inch.

“You never trained your body or honed your skills properly. Aside from eating and drinking, what else can you do? You must be retarded to challenge my arm strength.”

“Shit…!?”

“You want to kill Belgarians because your friends were killed? Then you can understand my rage, since you almost killed my friend!”

Bastian pushed the sword forward forcefully and pressed the skinhead back.

He took a step forth to close the distance.

And kicked the skinhead in the knee.

The sound of rubber being cut resounded in the night.

The skinhead cried.

And held his knee as he rolled on the ground.

Roland asked frantically:

“Y-You killed him?”

“Hey, don’t you have any common sense? I just shattered his kneecap, he won’t be able to walk without a clutch in the future.”

And probably can’t wield a sword anymore.

His leg was bent in the opposite direction.

Bastian’s lips trembled as he said:

“Bastian… You... will be killed too… I already told you to run… Why did you come to help me…?”

“You might be smart, but you got a couple of things wrong. First, the back door of the warehouse is guarded by the lackies of these people.”

“What!?”

“They are amateurs, so it’s easy to deduce their thinking. I already told Elise to lock the door, so it can only be opened from the inside. And the second thing is, it is impossible for these amateurs to kill me!”

After seeing the skinhead collapse, his comrades that were still standing charged with weapons in hand.

As they let loose a feral roar.

Bastian took out a dagger.

‘Vite Espace Trois’.

The sheath of the dagger was crafted by an excellent blacksmith, the body of the blade was wide with a triangular tip. It was about 4 Pa (30 cm) long.

It was said that the length matches the foot of the founding Emperor of Belgaria.

The dagger was as light as paper, known for its speed that seemed to be capable of cutting off sound.

“It is unexpectedly difficult to not kill these guys!”

He slashed at the sword of his opponent.

Clink… and with that, the cheap sword broke in half.

Bastian kicked the man’s knee, and before the cries of pain sounded out, he cut off the shoulder of another man along with his weapon.

Behind these two was a man with a rifle.

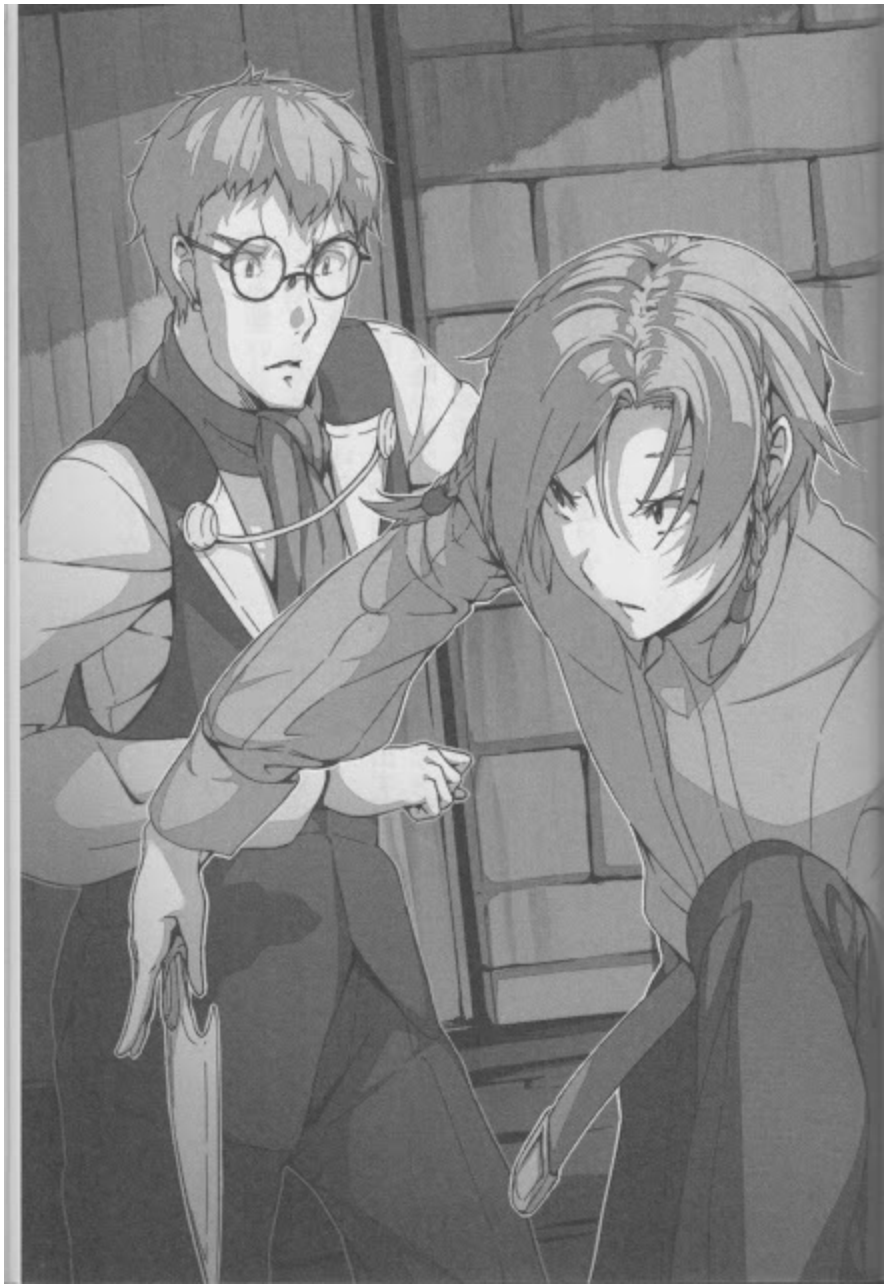
It was too dark to see the pull of the trigger, so Bastian had no choice but to twist his body to evade the possible bullet paths and close in on the enemy.

The man fired with a yell. The muzzle was trembling because of fear, making it even harder to judge the possible trajectory. Bastian had no choice but to approach from a completely different direction.

Despite that, that man still shouted: “H-He dodged the bullet!?”

—— You brought this on yourself!

Bastian replied in his heart, and slashed with his dagger as he dodged.



And cut the tendons on both of the man’s hands.

He couldn’t hold the gun anymore, and won’t be able to do anything unarmed.

And next ——

Roland shivered.

“... These actions don’t look humanly possible.”

“Don’t be stupid! This is the result of training!”

Bastian trained for a while in the mansion, but he still couldn't go all out. He gauged that he was only half as good compared to himself at full health.

Even so, it was more than enough to finish off these drunk amateurs.

Compared to the time he fought the regular army in Gray Bridge, this wasn't even a warm up.

Even so, he still needed some time to catch his breath after defeating 30 men.

Bastian wiped the sweat above his brow.

"Fu… As expected, my movements are a bit dull…"

The 'Loyal Soldiers' were scattered all over the ground groaning.

Roland's face turned green.

"Kisama, are you human or Kabane!?"

"Ah, sorry for scaring you. If you knew my brothers, you wouldn't be that surprised."

"You are saying that there are other people just like you in the capital!?"

"Not that many… Just Latreille, Eddie, and those known as heroes should be able to do this easily."

"... I understand now why you said the key to fighting a war is people."

"No, well, I'm not talking about people who could take on a hundred men. After all, these fellows aren't soldiers anyway… So I didn't kill them."

"I see."

"Some of them are bleeding quite badly, if their comrades at the backdoor of the warehouse aren't too apathetic, they would probably receive medical attention before they bleed to death."

“That’s great, I don’t wish for them to die.”

After they left the fallen ruffians behind, Elise dashed out from the warehouse.

“Bastian! Are you alright!?”

“Of course.”

“The ship is here!”

“Oh.”

Bits of light could be seen in the night.

It was a medium sized sail ship.

Faint light from the deck of the ship shone onto the dock, allowing the ship to approach land in the dark night.

If they didn’t have the equipment, it would have been very difficult.

The people hiding in the warehouse came out.

Even though most of the people rushed towards the ship, there were some who came to Bastian to offer their gratitude.

Elise breathed out in relief.

“That’s great. I was at a loss just then.”

“You too, how is it possible for me to lose to amateurs?”

“But I will still worry.”

“Hahaha…”

Suddenly, Roland waved towards the back and shouted something.

Bastian turned back immediately and realized his mistake.

The skinhead with the smashed kneecap was pointing the gun in his hand this way.

And he was aiming at Elise!?

He probably knew that Bastian will dodge if he aimed at him. So he aimed at Elise instead.

Elise took a step forward and screamed:

“Stop ——!!”

The man pulled the trigger.

“Go to hell——!!”

The gunshot rang out.

“!!”

The one who pounced before Bastian was Roland.

He leapt in front of Bastian.

And like a puppet with its strings cut…

Roland collapse onto the ground.

Bastian threw his dagger out.

And it stabbed deep into the stomach of the skinhead who fired.

A fatal wound? Bastian didn’t have time to care about that.

He dashed to Roland’s side and held him up.

“Roland!”

“… Bastian.”

He was hit in the chest. He didn’t die immediately and the bullet didn’t hit his heart, but he was bleeding profusely. It probably hit a vital organ, and ruptured an artery.

“H-Hang in there! I will get a doctor right away!”

“… It’s fine… I know… I’m going to die… right?”

“Ughh…”

Bastian already knew from his experience on the battlefield.

This was a mortal wound.

His sight became blurry.

As his eyes turned hot.

“It’s… all because I hesitated…”

“... No… It’s because my plan failed… Thank you… for protecting our comrades…”

“But isn’t it meaningless if you die!?”

“... I can only say… my luck was bad…”

“Is there anything I can do…”

“... Bastian, I need a favour from you.”

He wanted to move his hands, but couldn’t do so.

Elise squatted at his side, her tears flowed freely.

She then handed the book Roland was holding to him.

“This?”

“Is this it, Roland!?”

“... Ahhh… Yes… I will entrust this to you… in order… for the world to progress… into a place where everyone can pursue their… their own happiness…”

Bastian held his hand tightly.

“I promise! Leave it to me!”

Roland smiled.

“... Ahhh… I am… really happy.”

And those were Jean Roland de Tiraso Laverde’s last words.

The sailship left the dock in the night.

Inside a cabin in the ship, Bastian gently wipe the blood off his

dagger, and flipped open that book.

That was the only thing he brought.

Elise was beside him.

If she didn't persuade him, Bastian would probably not board the ship, motionlessly holding onto Roland's body. And this is something his friend who sacrificed his own life wouldn’t want to see.

In order to not let Elise worry, he had to look like he was okay.

But Bastian couldn’t stop his tears, he felt his emotions going numb, and the things he heard couldn’t go into his head.

Could he keep his promise like this…?

The book was opened.

And was filled with Roland’s writings.

And his words.

Bastian’s eyes grew misty again.

“Elise… Elise…”

“Bastian… Don’t cry…”

“I-It’s here… right here… Roland is right here… his words are all here.”

He sobbed.

Elise reached out and held Bastian’s head in her arms.

She couldn’t help sobbing softly once more.

The sailboat set off slowly towards the Belgaria Empire in the cover of night.

# Credits

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Author | — | (むらさき ゆきや) Yukiya Murasaki |
| Illustrator | — | himesuz |
| Translators | — | Skythewood |
| Editors | — | Darkdhaos<br>Ice Phantom |
| Book designer | — | Armaell |

アルティー十 短篇集、
読んでくださってありがとうございます。
個人的にバスティアンが
男気があってかっこいいのが
お気に入りです。
むらさきさん、担当の和田さん、
今回も集中させていただいて
ありがとうございました。